

St Chad's was one of the oldest and most reputable of provincial hospitals. To have trained at St Chad's gave any nurse a cachet. Ursula had chosen it partly on that account and partly because it was near home. Evelyn, her cousin who had been brought up with Ursula, had chosen it because Patrick Elbure was on its staff. But the note she received saying 'Lyn, my love, I must see you. Meet me at midnight tonight in the bellry. Yours P.' turned out to be a trick and led to her expulsion in disgrace. It also looked like damaging Patrick's career. Passionately in love with Patrick as she was, Evelyn agreed to his brother Val's suggestion that she should pretend to be engaged to him. Having saved the situation, however, she discovered that her problems were only just beginning and Val assumed more and more importance as he delved deeper into the mysterious misfortunes which came to her. After she left the hospital and returned to Ursula's home

Also by Theresa Chant's

AT A TOUCH I YIELD

FAIRER THAN SHE

MY ONLY LOVE

THE KINDER LOVE

by
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CHAPTER I

I'm to be Queen o' the May.

ALFRED, LORD IENNYSON

'Evelyn! Evelyn Shelley . . .'

It was a tentative whisper at first. Then, it was a clear-toned, crisp announcement, half drowned by a roar of applause. Suddenly, my name seemed to be on everyone's lips, echoing and re-echoing through the big hall.

Ursula, beside me, dug me sharply in the ribs.

'Get up and bow!' she prompted me.

Flushed and confused, I stumbled to my feet. I hadn't been prepared for this. Someone ought to have warned me, I thought dazedly. Even if it had been a secret ballot, there must have been some among my friends who had guessed how it would go. Some of them must have been canvassing for me, as I had been canvassing for Ursula.

I glanced down at my cousin in compunction. She was clapping with the rest. Her fair, classically featured face was serene and smiling. She was much too generous and unselfish ever to grudge me anything, but the title of 'May Queen' should have been hers, not mine. She was far and away the pick of St. Chad's student nurses. I couldn't quite believe that my votes had outnumbered hers.

Ought I to ask for a recount? Wasn't it possible that, because we both had the same surname, there had been a mistake? Perhaps some of the voters had just put 'Nurse Shelley', without any Christian name.

Matron was holding up her hands for silence. She was announcing that the runner-up—and chief maid-of-honour—was Ursula Shelley.

More applause. I sat down hurriedly. Ursula rose and touched her fingers to her lips before she raised her hand in

a charming gesture of acknowledgment. It was just like Ursula to take her defeat so graciously, but I felt dreadfully guilty about it. Never before in her life had Ursula been obliged to come second to me.

If the Sisters and Staff Nurses had been eligible to vote, the result would certainly have been reversed. Probably, I shouldn't even have been placed. Ursula was a general favourite with our 'elders and betters'. I was perpetually in hot water. I could never remember the little details which Sisters deemed so important. Those who had a mild liking for me said that I 'didn't stop to think'. Those who hadn't, held that I was incapable of using my head.

I had long ago resigned myself to the fact that I shouldn't be one of St. Chad's spectacular successes; that I should, indeed, be lucky if I passed my finals before I was banished with ignominy for yielding to some foolish impulse. Time and again, I had narrowly escaped with a severe reprimand. How was it, then, that I had been elected to the coveted position of 'May Queen'?

Was it a colossal joke at my expense? Had my fellow students decided to vote for the most scatter-brained, clumsy, and incompetent among them? No one could possibly imagine that I was 'the most truly dedicated, the nurse most nearly akin in spirit to Florence Nightingale', which was the grandiloquent description attached to the title of 'May Queen'.

'I can't understand it,' I said helplessly, as we began to file from the hall. 'Why should so many people have voted for me?'

Ursula gave my arm a swift, elder-sisterly squeeze.

'They were sorry for you, Eve. You're always trying so hard and always tripping over your own feet,' she said with tolerant affection.

'Oh!'

I felt suddenly deflated. I hadn't wanted to play on anyone's sympathy.

'There's bound to be jealousy and rivalry over the

election, but no one could be jealous of you,' she added kindly. 'Everyone loves a clown.'

I flinched inwardly. Was that how even my cousin saw me? As a good-natured, blundering, ludicrous clown?

'Don't believe it!' hissed a low, fierce voice in my ear.

I turned, from following Ursula, to grin at Rosemary Harker. Next to Ursula, Rosemary was my closest friend at St. Chad's. We were on the same ward, and frequently shared the most withering criticisms. Rosemary wasn't at all like her romantic name. She was short and stocky, with a quick temper, an edge to her tongue, and a frankly expressed scorn for most men.

'People voted for you because they like you, and because they're sick of seeing you extinguished by St. Ursula,' Rosemary said rapidly, too low to reach anyone's ears but mine. 'You're always championing other people, and covering up for them. It was time they settled a few debts.'

I couldn't, as usual, rush to defend Ursula from her mockery because, as we streamed out into the quad, a small crowd was surrounding me. Congratulations, good wishes, and affectionate slaps on the back were a new and exciting experience. I hadn't dreamt that I had so many friends and well-wishers.

I glanced round uneasily for Ursula, but she hadn't lingered. I glimpsed her tall, supple figure and shining fair hair halfway across the quad. Ursula was never known to be late on duty. Obviously, she didn't intend to make this morning an exception.

There was no reason why she should have waited to share the congratulations with me, but I couldn't help feeling as if she had deliberately detached herself. Had she, beneath her smiling composure, been secretly disappointed? Had she, who had won the title in her first year, confidently expected to win it again in her last?

I didn't like to think that I had been unwittingly responsible for her disappointment, but there was nothing I could do about it now, so I might as well revel in the thrill of

the prospects before me. Apart from the colourful and historic crowning ceremony on May Day, the May Queen was accorded special privileges. Some of them would be extremely valuable to me. Would Patrick find them valuable, too?

Until now there had been countless, invisible barriers between us. As May Queen, I should attend conferences and committee meetings, to represent the student nurses. I should meet Patrick at them. In public and on official business, of course, but at least I should be able to see him and speak to him, without breaking any of St. Chad's unwritten laws.

St. Chad's was one of the oldest and most highly reputable of provincial hospitals. It was hedged about by ancient and sometimes outmoded traditions, but it took a pride in refusing to modify them. To have trained at St. Chad's gave any nurse a cachet. Ursula had chosen it partly on that account and partly because it was within a convenient distance of home.

To me, St. Chad's chief attraction was that Patrick Elbure, once among its medical students, was now on its staff. I would cheerfully have gone to the ends of the earth in order to be near Patrick. I would even have struck out on my own, away from Ursula's encouragement and support.

I had been immensely relieved, though, when her choice had fallen on St. Chad's. I was used to following her lead. She was only two years my senior in age, but she was infinitely more mature in every other way. I had been brought up by Ursula, no less than by her mother . . . my aunt by marriage.

Ursula's mother had spent five years running our country vicarage and me for my father, after my mother's death. She had been an impecunious widow with one daughter, and so it had been a convenient arrangement for her, as well as for us. Then, while Ursula and I had still been schoolgirls, her mother had surprised us by marrying the local squire, a widower with two sons.

What the two boys—Patrick and Valentine Elburr—had thought of their father's remarriage, I had never known. However intimate one might be with the Elbures, one wouldn't dare to catechize them about their personal concerns. Patrick, in particular, had a 'touch-me-not' air which would have quelled the most inquisitive questioner.

Outwardly, at least, Aunt Beatrice was on excellent terms with her stepsons. She ran the Manor as smoothly and graciously as she had run the vicarage. Ursula and I had been encouraged to feel that we had two homes instead of one, and two brothers by adoption.

Ursula might assume a sisterly attitude towards her step-brothers, but I couldn't regard Patrick as an elder brother, or even as a cousin by marriage. He was my hero, my love, my beau-ideal. There was no man in the whole world to be compared with him. There was no place in my heart comparable to the one he occupied. Should I have come to St. Chad's and struggled through my training, if not on Patrick's account?

Father had wanted me to stay at home with him. I should have found plenty to do at home, but, dearly as I loved my father, I loved Patrick more. I had to share his life, his interests, and his profession, to the best of my ability. From the moment I had known that Patrick was determined to become a doctor, I had resolved to make myself an efficient nurse.

Patrick would be pleased and proud that I had been chosen 'Queen of the May'. I longed to be the first to give him the news, but that was impossible, of course. I couldn't outrage all the conventions by rushing madly around the hospital, looking for him." I was due back on duty, and I was late already.

I broke away from my well-wishers and raced across the quad, with Rosemary panting after me. We were both on the Children's Ward . . . the medical, not the surgical ward. Ursula was on the surgical ward. I envied her for that, because she was bound to see Patrick every day, even though it was only publicly and officially, in his rôle of

house-surgeon. I had to be content with the merest, most fleeting glimpses of him.

Ursula, as his stepsister, had a certain status with regard to Patrick. I hadn't. A step-cousin didn't count, and there hadn't, as yet, been any suggestion of an engagement between us. I hadn't any definite reason to suppose that he wanted to marry me. It was simply intuition which told me so.

For once, Sister overlooked the flushed, breathless condition in which we reached the ward. She even unbent enough to congratulate me, though she added tartly that she hoped the excitement wouldn't go to my head.

'She was the May Queen of her year,' Rosemary murmured to me as we began our usual chores. 'Incredible, isn't it?'

Sister was gaunt and middle-aged, with wispy grey hair and gold-rimmed glasses. I tried to visualize her as a girl, in the white gown and floral wreath of the May Queen, but my imagination failed me. Instead, I fell to dreaming of the kind of picture I should present, in the traditional white gown.

I hadn't Ursula's classic features, or Ursula's graceful, well-proportioned figure. I was of medium height and slim to the verge of thinness. I had naturally wavy, silky dark brown hair, with dark brown eyes to match, and rakishly slanting brows which were almost black. My nose just missed an impertinent tilt. My lips had it instead. They quirked up at the corners. That quirk, and their full curves, had earned me an undeserved reputation for frivolity.

How could I look properly serious and demure, with those brows and that mouth? Even my chin emphasized the false impression, because it had an absurd, dimpled cleft in it. In actual fact, I was no more flighty or irresponsible than any other girl of twenty. Less, perhaps, because my heart was fixed on Patrick, and I had no inclination to flirt with any of the medical students who made eyes at me.

I let them date me occasionally, in self-protection,

because I didn't want anyone to guess how it was between Patrick and me. That was a secret which I guarded so jealously that even Ursula believed that I enjoyed playing the field. If I didn't care greatly about my own dignity, I cared desperately about Patrick's. I was determined that no breath of gossip, no ill-mannered sniggers or riotous speculations should ever touch him through me.

I sensed that he felt the same about me. We were chary even of meeting each other's eyes in public, lest we should inadvertently betray ourselves.

Only, now and again, at rare intervals did I catch his glance on me, with an intimacy and possession in it which sent my pulse rate soaring.

When he saw me in my white gown on May Day, would he instantly visualize me as a bride? I should look well in white, because I had a warm, peach-like skin with no trace of sallowness in it. The wreath of white flowers would show up attractively on my dark hair. The full-skirted white picture-gown would be easy to wear with my twenty-two inch waist and slender hips.

For once, if all went well, I might look quite glamorous. For once, I shouldn't be extinguished by my lovely cousin. For once, I should be the centre-piece of St. Chad's . . .

'Nurse . . .' It was Sister's imperative voice. 'Could you kindly come out of your day-dreams and attend to little Billy Benson? He has just been sick. You'll have to change his pyjamas and the sheets.'

Small Billy was one of my favourite patients. He was in tears now and calling piteously for his 'Mummie'. I scurried across the ward to mop him up, to wash his tear-stained face, and to coax a smile back to it. He was a thin little boy with curly dark hair and big, appealing grey eyes. I fancied that Patrick, at his age, must have looked remarkably like Billy. Perhaps, one day, Patrick and I would have a son with dark curls and grey eyes . . .

Would Patrick insist upon waiting till I had passed my finals? Or would he ask me to marry him as soon as I was twenty-one next December?

CHAPTER II

To the Dark Tower came.

R. BROWNING

The envelope was propped against the mirror on my dressing chest. It was a plain white envelope, with 'Miss Evelyn Shelley' printed on it in capitals. I stared at it in blank surprise. I couldn't imagine who had put it there. My contemporaries and I weren't in the habit of exchanging notes among ourselves. Even invitations to 'dates' were usually given verbally.

I tore the envelope open and drew out a sheet of crested paper. The crest, with its charging, antlered stag, and the Latin motto which Val laughingly translated as 'Out of my way—' made me blink. I knew the crest as well as I knew my own name, or the address beside it—'Many Waters, Watersfall, Nr. Tretavy, Cornwall'. The address had been struck through lightly and 'St. Chad's' inscribed above the crest.

That handwriting, that neat, firm, beautifully legible handwriting, set the blood leaping through my veins, even before I had read the brief note.

LYN, MY LOVE,

I must see you. Meet me at midnight, tonight, in the bellry. It's U and E.

Yours,
P.

My heart thudded against my ribs. 'U and E' was one of those not very clever family jests which stick and pass into a family vocabulary for good. It stood for 'urgent and essential'. It dated back to Patrick's and Valentine's prep school days. A master of theirs had had the habit

or marking orders 'urgent and essential'. Valentine had noted that the initials were mine and Ursula's. For a time, he had called Ursula 'Urgent' and me 'Essential'. Eventually, he had let the inappropriate nicknames drop, but the initials were still used by both brothers to signify a 'must'.

What had happened to make a meeting between Patrick and me 'U and E'? I wondered apprehensively. It could only be something of vital importance to us both which had prompted his note. Never before had Patrick suggested meeting me at such an hour and in such a place. Now, the curt phrasing made it a command, rather than an invitation or an appeal. He hadn't asked: 'Will you meet me?' or 'Can you possibly meet me?' He had written: 'Meet me.'

He must have known, of course, that a request from him was equivalent to a royal command to me. All the same, he might have offered an alternative. What he had ordained was a terribly risky assignation. To be out of her room at midnight would be a cardinal crime for any nurse, unless she had a late pass. To be caught out in the grounds or in the belfry, with a man, would damn a nurse for ever in Matron's eyes. If that man was St. Chad's brilliant young house surgeon, the whole staff would be ready to tear her reputation to shreds . . . for sheer envy, if nothing else.

It wasn't like Patrick to subject me to any avoidable danger. Even at hospital dances, he was careful not to make me conspicuous by dancing with me too often. On the rare occasions when he took me out, it was always in a party, with Ursula or some married acquaintance of his as chaperon. I liked to think that he was jealous of my reputation, but Val insisted that Patrick was primarily concerned with his own.

It was easy for Val to gibe at his elder brother. Val had no great need to watch his step. He wasn't a rising young surgeon. He had elected to go in for forestry. He was at home now, acting as a tree doctor and afforestation

expert to anyone who cared to employ him. In between jobs, he dealt with the Manor woods, which were both extensive and neglected.

Val took life gaily and smoothly. He was that kind of person. He wasn't prone to worrying or to over-working. He possessed infectiously good spirits and a keen sense of humour. He was excellent company and unhurriedly competent in all his undertakings, but he lacked Patrick's depths.

Patrick had character; enough for himself and Val, too. Patrick was ambitious as well as brilliant. Patrick could say 'Out of my way' and see to it that nothing kept him from his goal. That was another reason why I was bewildered and perturbed by his note. It sounded almost as if he were relying upon me for some form of assistance. Yet for Patrick to send out an S.O.S. was quite unprecedented.

How had the note been delivered? That was a problem, too. Patrick could scarcely have marched openly into the Nurses' Hostel and inquired for my room. He must have entrusted the envelope to someone who could come and go here without exciting comment. I was suddenly absurdly jealous of the nurse who was sufficiently in his confidence to be used as his messenger. Unless, of course, it had been Ursula. I couldn't be jealous of Ursula. Surely, though, Ursula would have given the envelope to me instead of leaving it on my dressing-chest?

Besides, Ursula wouldn't have undertaken to deliver a note without knowing its contents . . . and, if she had known them, she would have refused to be a party to such a rendezvous. Ursula still maintained her elder-sisterly attitude towards me. She was perpetually striving to keep me out of trouble with the authorities.

I heard footsteps in the passage. I crumpled Patrick's note into a tight little ball. My inclination was to keep it among the all too few letters I had received from him, but that, I reflected, would be too risky. Wiser to destroy the

evidence of such a perilous escapade. Reluctantly, I tore the crested paper into tiny shreds.

Midnight? How was I to leave the hostel unseen at midnight? The night porter would be guarding the main door. The other doors would be locked and bolted. I should have to slip out of a downstairs window. Whose window? Rosemary slept on the third floor, as I did. Ursula's room was on the ground floor, but would she let me use her window? Wouldn't she insist on being told why and wherefore?

There was a light, preliminary tap and my door swung open. Before I could say: 'Come in!' Ursula was with me.

'Hello!' I said, feeling horribly guilty and hoping I didn't look it.

She gave me her customary, serene smile.

'I just looked in to warn you that I'm going on night duty.'

'Oh!' I said blankly. 'Tonight? But . . . it isn't your shift. You've been on all day. What has happened?'

'I had the afternoon off and got in some sleep then. Daphne has gone sick, with that sinus trouble of hers again. I volunteered to replace her.'

'Oh!' I repeated uneasily.

I wasn't at all sure why I felt uneasy. There was nothing alarming or out of the way in Ursula's crisp explanation. It was typical of her general unselfishness to act as substitute at short notice, for one of her friends. Not that Daphne Allen was a particular friend of hers, but they were on the same ward, and Ursula was always ready to do anyone a good turn.

'I thought you might wonder what had become of me, and be afraid I'd gone sick,' Ursula added smoothly.

I shouldn't have been afraid of that, because Ursula never did go sick. She was amazingly tough. I couldn't remember that she had ever spent a day in bed.

'Nice of you to warn me,' I said abstractedly.

Nice, perhaps, but also a little odd. Why had she deemed it necessary? Someone would have told me where

she was, had I noticed her absence and commented on it.

'You'll be careful, won't you? Don't get into any mischief while I'm not around to keep an eye on you,' she said briskly. 'It would be too bad if you were forced to abdicate before you were crowned.'

She laughed, her own special, musically rippling laugh. I laughed with her, but half-heartedly. I didn't really see anything amusing in her warning. It would be unbearably humiliating to lose the May Queen's crown before it was actually on my head.

'I'll be careful,' I said flatly.

'Good girl! So long, pet.'

She had gone before I could rally my confused wits. Had she delivered Patrick's note? Had she known—or suspected—its contents? Was that why she had looked in on me with her warnings?

Why hadn't she been frank, then? Why hadn't she categorically forbidden me to respond to the S.O.S.? Because she had known that, where Patrick was concerned, I wasn't amenable to reason?

Or had she secretly sympathised with me? Had she wanted to tell me that her bedroom would be vacant tonight? Had she, guessing that she couldn't stop me, tried to make the escapade as safe for me as possible? That would be just like Ursula, I thought gratefully. Rosemary might mock at her and nickname her St. Ursula, but Ursula really was an exceptional and wonderful person. She was gold all through; twenty two carat gold.

Midnight seemed to be hours and hours away. It was one of St. Chad's old-fashioned rules that 'lights out' in the hostel was at eleven o'clock. Punctually at eleven o'clock, all electricity was switched off at the main. Of course, most of the student nurses kept private supplies of candles, torches, and methyated spirit stoves. As a probationer, I had often partaken of midnight feasts. In one's third year, though, they were considered *infra dig.*, except for teenagers. It was quite a long time now since I had needed a torch. When I had succeeded in locating mine, its battery

was almost extinct. If I husbanded it, I might contrive to make my way to the belfry by its feeble glimmer. On the return journey, unless the moon had risen, I should have to rely upon Patrick to see me safely home.

Patrick would have an adequate torch, of course. Patrick's belongings invariably functioned properly. He took care of that.

I had a warm bath, to while away some of the surplus time. Then I clad myself in a serviceable pair of black corduroy slacks and a black high-necked jersey. The belfry was probably thick with dust and grime. It was an eerie spot to have chosen for a lovers' meeting.

The chapel was very old; much older than the hospital. Its belfry tower looked square and solid from outside, but a horrid, narrow, twisting iron staircase, not much more than a ladder, led up it from inside. If there weren't mice, there would certainly be bats in the tower. The chapel itself had a thatched roof which seemed to attract insects of every variety, and the bats, of course, were attracted by the insects rather than by the belfry.

It gave me a queer, shivery feeling when the hostel lights went out, plunging me suddenly into darkness. I was sitting on the edge of my bed, trying vainly to concentrate on a text-book. I stumbled to the window and stared out across the quad. It was reassuring to see the chinks of light showing from the curtained windows of the Staff Hostel, where the Staff Nurses and Sisters slept.

I couldn't from my room see the main buildings of the hospital. I couldn't see the chapel, either. The chapel was away from the other buildings, in an ancient, long-disused graveyard. Most of the graves were covered with turf now, but a few weather-beaten tombstones still stuck up at weird angles like grotesque sentinels.

Patrick knew that I had reasonably good nerves. Even so, he might have thought of a less eerie meeting-place. The prospect of being with him—and alone with him, away from all prying eyes—wasn't as enticing as it should have

been. I was obsessed by worried speculations about the matter which had prompted his 'U and E'.

That last forty minutes, waiting in the darkness, was a wretched ordeal. I was thankful when I heard the clock in the tower strike the three quarters. Then, gripping my feeble torch in my left hand, I crept from the room. In rubber-soled canvas shoes, I moved noiselessly along the landing to the stairs.

The hostel was an old building which had been converted into a dormitory for student nurses. I knew the stairs would creak. I wouldn't risk them. I slid down the banisters.

My knees were trembling when I reached the ground floor safely. I had to use my torch to locate Ursula's room. I dared not risk blundering in on some innocent sleeper.

Her room had a bare, swept look, as if no one had occupied it for weeks. Ursula was allergic to what she called 'clutter'. There were no pictures or photographs, no ornaments or vases in her room; nothing at all that could collect dust. The result was painfully tidy and impersonal. It didn't seem to go with Ursula's gracious personality.

The curtains were undrawn and the window was wide open. So far, so good. I put one leg over the sill. Then, suddenly, panic seized me. It took a definite mental effort to pull myself out on to the sill and to drop to the concrete below. It was only a very slight drop, but I began to wonder feverishly if I could climb back to the sill. I had never tried to break into the hostel after lights out. Suppose I couldn't quite reach the sill?

Shaken by the impact of the concrete beneath my thin shoes, and even more shaken by inward misgivings, I crouched there in the darkness. Every nerve of me was stretched taut. My strained and straining ears picked up and magnified a dozen faint sounds. My hands were so clammy that I nearly dropped the torch. The pulses over my temples were beating madly in a kind of giant question-mark.

I gritted my teeth. To cower here, asking 'Why?' was the height of feebleness and stupidity. I fumbled my way along the wall as far as it went. Then, with the courage of desperation, I plunged off at a tangent, into the darkness.

The path to the chapel wound through shrubberies. If there was any light from the stars, dimly visible above, it didn't penetrate to me. I felt hemmed in and suffocated by the intense blackness. I switched on my torch, keeping it directed downwards. Then, I had to switch it off again, because I had a sudden conviction that I was being followed.

Could I hear footsteps . . . stealthy, almost soundless footsteps? I couldn't be certain. A rat, a rabbit, or even an active mouse could have made those barely perceptible rustlings. So could a nurse, in a freshly starched uniform.

My every impulse was to stop and call: 'Is there anyone there?'

I checked it firmly. If there was someone behind me, I mustn't challenge her. If she, too, was engaged in some nefarious business, she would melt away without answering. If she was someone in authority, I should be for it.

I quickened my steps. The shrubbery ended abruptly at the open iron gates of the old churchyard. I could just distinguish the dark bulk of the chapel, with its tower standing out against the sky. There was a little more light now. Perhaps the moon was rising.

I scurried down the narrow path between the stretches of turf. I reached the small, heavy oak door which led directly to the tower. It was open . . . ajar. Then Patrick must be here before me.

The thought of his proximity, and the hunger to feel it, drove all else from my mind. I pushed the door wide open and stumbled forward. One of the bell-ropes swung against my forehead. I jerked away from it and stubbed my toes on the iron stairway.

I said faintly: 'Patrick! Patrick, are you there?'

There was no answer except a dull echo. Perhaps he had

gone up the tower. He had always liked climbing. He had a marvellous head for heights. He would sit right on the narrow parapet of our church tower at home, swinging his long legs over it, into space.

I had never been to the top of this tower, but it would obviously be a pleasanter background than its musty, grimy interior. In the open, with only the sky above, the tower might seem quite a romantic rendezvous after all.

I switched on my torch and started up the stairway. It was just as dusty and grimy as I had anticipated. There were cobwebs everywhere and scuttling spiders.

Patrick might have waited for me. He was too lordly; too high-handed. He took it for granted that, wherever he beckoned, I would follow. The humiliating part of it was that he was right. I was drawn after him irresistibly.

I called again: 'Patrick! Patrick!' raising my voice a little.

I heard a movement below. Then, the chimes of the big clock drowned out every other sound. I paused, clinging to the iron stairs, while the slow, heavy notes struck and reverberated overhead.

The silence afterwards could be felt. I drew a deep, quick breath. Then, I was aware that someone was mounting the stairs below me.

For the third time, I said: 'Patrick?'

'Put out that torch, you little idiot!' his familiar, coolly astringent voice answered. 'And don't shout . . .'

'I wasn't shouting. I . . . Oh, Patrick . . .'

I turned blindly downwards again. Where the stairway twisted, we met. His arms closed around me. I clung to him, quivering. It seemed years and years instead of only a few months, since I had been held firmly to him, like this.

I could feel the same leashed hunger in him which was tugging at me. It was in the hard, swift pressure of his lips on mine and in the uncomfortably tight grip of his lean fingers. My head was tilted back at an awkward angle and the iron of the stairway was cutting into one hip. I almost welcomed the minor discomforts, though. They

made me certain that this was real, and not just one more frustrated dream.

He was obliged to release me at last, in order to suppress a fit of sneezing. My nostrils were being tickled by the dust, too.

'Let's go to the top and get some fresh air,' I said impulsively. 'We can't talk here without being choked.'

'Quickly, then! I mustn't linger . . .'

I scrambled upwards hurriedly, with Patrick close behind me. The air was blessedly cool and fresh, when we emerged on to the flat roof. I leaned against the parapet, breathing deeply and thankfully. The stars seemed quite close to us now and the darkness was giving way to a pale, silvery light.

'I've never been up here before, but it's lovely,' I murmured, still bemused by the passion of that embrace on the stairs. 'I don't know why I panicked. Look! It's like a new, enchanted country spread out below us. I can see the river . . .'

'You didn't bring me up here at midnight, just to show me the view, I presume?' Patrick said dryly.

'What?' I glanced at him uncomprehendingly. 'No. Of course not. Did you want to stay down below? It was so dusty . . .'

'It was sheer insanity to meet here at all. A delectable kind of insanity admittedly . . .'

He flung one arm over my shoulders possessively. 'Yes, delectable's the word for you, Lyn, but it's still insanity.'

'Then, *why*?' I asked helplessly.

'*Why*?' F
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'Why did you choose this place?'

'I? I chose this place? What on earth do you mean?' His tone was roughened and edgy. His fingers dug into my shoulder. 'I could scarcely turn down your S.O.S., could I? That's not to say that I approve of this kind of escapade. It's damnably risky.'

'My S.O.S.? That—that's fantastic. I didn't send you any S.O.S.'

'That was how your note read to me.'

'My note? This isn't the first of April. What about your note?'

'Mine? I didn't write to you.'

'Oh, Patrick, you did! You told me to meet you here. You said it was "U and E". So—so, of course, I came.'

'What's that? Are you trying to put something over on me? *You* said it was "U and E".'

'I didn't. *You* did. I didn't write to you. You wrote to me.'

'I did *not*!'

'But, Patrick, I had the note. It was in your writing, I protested confusedly.

'Yours was in your writing.'

'Oh, no! It can't have been.'

'Do you think I don't know it? What's the matter? Why are you bent on denying that you sent for me?'

'Because—because I *didn't*,' I said desperately. 'I wouldn't have dared. If you didn't write to me, who did? It was a marvellous forgery . . . if it was a forgery.'

'Are you doubting my word?'

'No. Only, it's so odd. Could someone have got hold of an old note of yours and used it?'

'Impossible! There never was such a note. Give me credit for a modicum of common sense.'

'Then . . . then, it was just a belated April Fools' trick?' I said dazedly. 'How utterly pointless!'

'If your theory is correct, someone went to a great deal of trouble to bring us together here. It can hardly have been pointless,' Patrick said grimly. 'Come on! The sooner we're out of this, the better.'

My former sense of apprehension came back to me, as we dived into the dark interior of the tower again. Who had played such an idiotic trick on us? One of the medical students? But . . . why? To make Patrick look and feel small?

'Careful, Lyn. Don't fall! An accident now would be disastrous,' Patrick said urgently.

That gave me a chilly feeling. Was his concern for the result of an accident concentrated on himself? Was he more afraid of this incident coming to light than of any possible damage to me?

'I shan't fall,' I said dully. 'Patrick, who would know you intimately enough to put "U and E" on the note?'

He didn't answer. I had an unnerving suspicion that he hadn't believed my denials. Oh, but how could he imagine that I had lied about the note? When had I ever lied to him?

'Patrick . . .' I said desperately.

'Do stop bleating my name,' he said shortly 'Haven't you ever heard that walls have ears? What possible justification could I offer for being here with you, when I should be on call?'

'There wouldn't be any justification for me, either . . .'

'Why didn't you think of that? Why can't you use your head?'

'I did think of it, but I imagined that—that you needed me,' I said huskily.

'Needed you? What nonsense is this?' His tone was withering in its frosty impatience. 'It sounds as though that May Queen affair has turned your head.'

I swallowed hard. It might have been Sister speaking . . . any Sister. I wasn't accustomed to that tone from Patrick. I certainly hadn't deserved it now.

'I wish I hadn't destroyed your note. I wish I'd brought it with me,' I said angrily. 'Is it likely that I would have asked you to meet me here at midnight? Have I ever asked you to meet me anywhere?'

'There's always a first time, and I suppose I've been remiss in not conveying my congratulations to you before now,' he said dispassionately. 'Ursula seemed to think that I'd hurt your feelings . . . but what chance have I had to contact you, since the result was made known?'

'Ursula? She told you that? When?'

'When I was doing my round. She's like a mother hen

over you,' he said, more tolerantly. 'When are you going to grow up and stop hanging on to her apron-strings?'

'I don't. That isn't fair,' I protested. 'If I were as infantile as you imagine, should I have been chosen as May Queen?'

'Why not? You're one of the prettiest girls in St. Chad's, and quite the most endearing, even when you're exasperating,' he said, with a swift change of tone. 'Besides, Ursula has a good deal of influence, and she was determined that you should be elected. It was your last chance.'

I bit my lower lip. I didn't want to owe my election to Ursula. I owed her too much already. Had she been canvassing for me? Rosemary hadn't said so. Rosemary had seemed to imply that I had been the candidate of all those who were jealous of my lovely cousin. Ursula was too often held up as a model to the rest of us, by someone in authority. That was why she had been nicknamed 'St. Ursula' by Rosemary and Rosemary's gang.

It had been exactly the same in our schooldays. Ursula had been a general favourite with the mistresses. She had been the ideal pupil from their point of view. She had been popular in her own immediate circle, and envied and admired by those outside it. The envy had prevented her from ever being the best-loved girl in the school. She had known that and been resigned to it. From her early childhood, she had been destined to arouse envy and jealousy in lesser mortals.

I loved her dearly. I admired her whole-heartedly. Yet, to my shame, I had to confess to a pang of jealousy when Patrick spoke of her in that softened tone. It was nice that he was fond of her . . . as long as he didn't become too fond of her.

'She won't tell you, of course, but she could have had the title again. She deliberately passed it on to you. Typical of her, wasn't it?' Patrick said indulgently.

'Yes. Quite typical.'

At the back of my mind, a derisive little voice cried out:

'Typical . . . if it were true. It isn't true. Ursula doesn't cast honours or privileges aside lightly, even for you. She's merely making a virtue of necessity.'

I couldn't say that aloud. It would have sounded dreadfully cattish and ungenerous. Besides, I didn't really think it.

My foot slipped on the bottom stair. I blundered forward and collided with the bell-ropes again. I gave a muffled cry as one of them slapped me on the cheek.

The next instant, my ejaculation was echoed, more vehemently, by Patrick.

'What's the matter?' I asked, and switched on my feeble torch.

The pencil of light showed me Patrick by the door, with his right hand on the iron handle and his right knee against the heavy oak.

For a moment, my resentment forgotten, I allowed myself to adore him with my eyes. He was handsome in the fashion which most appealed to me, a cool, clear-cut, well-bred fashion. He had smooth, dark brown hair, with copper glints in it, a decisively chiselled profile, and deep-set, fine grey eyes. In figure, he was tall and lean, with a narrow waist and tapering hips. He had always been oddly poised and self-reliant, so that he appeared older than his years. He was only nine years my senior, but his manner and bearing suggested a man nearing the forties, a man accustomed to a position of authority.

'What is it? Has the door stuck?' I asked, as he flung his whole weight against it, without any visible result.

He swung round, his face bleak, and snatched the torch from me. He shone it on the lock. Then, he turned to me again. By the flickering light, his profile looked as if it were that of a marble effigy.

'Now, what have you let us in for, you little idiot? The door's locked,' he said furiously.

CHAPTER III

In the fell clutch of circumstance.

W. E. HENLEY

'Stop it! You're only exhausting yourself,' Patrick said coldly.

He was right, of course. My assaults on that unyielding door were a sheer waste of energy. I had had to bruise my shoulders and fingers, though, before I could really believe that the door was locked. It didn't seem possible.

'If this is your idea of a joke . . .' Patrick began.

'A joke?' I echoed unsteadily.

'Don't hedge! Have you the key—or haven't you?'

'Of course I haven't. How could I have? I was half-way up the stairway when you came into the tower. Did you close the door after you? Perhaps you locked it . . .'

'I neither closed it nor locked it. Do you imagine that I'm mad?'

'Then . . . then . . . *how* . . . ?'

'Hadn't you better ask *who*?' The door didn't lock itself.'

'Oh, Patrick!' I caught my breath sharply. 'But . . . who would do such a thing?'

'That's what I want to know. Who?'

'The person who forged the notes, I suppose,' I said, panic surging through me again. 'What a low-down, contemptible kind of trick to play on us! It isn't even remotely funny.'

'I should say not,' Patrick said grimly. 'You seem calm enough about it. Don't you realize what it means? If the notes were forged, how are we to prove it? If we could prove it, we should still be in a mess. The fact that we

responded to them is enough to damn us. We're here together at midnight. Who'll care how or why?'

I saw it, then. The fact that we had been tricked into this meeting wouldn't help either of us with the authorities. We had no possible justification for meeting here at such an hour. We weren't even related. We weren't officially engaged. We were nothing to each other, as far as the general public knew.

'What are we to do?' I tried to keep my voice steady, but it shook miserably. 'I could say it was my fault.'

'That wouldn't help. We must get out of here, before our invisible enemy makes the next move.'

'What will that be?'

'To ensure that someone who counts will find us here.'

'Oh!' I shivered. 'It's—it's unnerving to think that either of us has such a deadly enemy. Who could want to ruin us?'

'I don't know, but I've no intention of letting him get away with it,' Patrick said resolutely. 'It's obviously futile to try to force this lock. We must use another exit.'

'What exit? We couldn't escape through the windows. They're mere slits. There isn't another door, except the door into the vestry—and that's hopeless, too,' I said dully.

Patrick nodded. Neither door had even moved beneath his furious assaults on it. In this barren place, there were no tools of any kind. There wasn't even anything which could be used as a battering-ram.

'The roof,' he said briefly. 'That's all that's left to us.'

'The roof? Are you crazy?'

'No. It isn't too big a drop from the tower to the chapel roof. I can make it,' he said coolly. 'It'll be quite simple to slide down the thatch and drop from the guttering.'

'It won't be simple. It'll be horribly dangerous. You mustn't attempt it,' I said agitatedly. 'You might hurt yourself badly.'

'And shan't I be hurt if I stay tamely here?' he retorted. 'I prefer a mild risk to an absolute certainty.'

'Is it a certainty? I mean, it might be only a silly joke.'

'It's far too elaborate for that. Someone must have spent hours learning to imitate your handwriting . . . and mine. Someone has it in for us. For me, at any rate,' he said emphatically. 'He used the one and only lure which could have landed me in a set-up like this. He's been fiendishly clever . . . but he shan't get away with it.'

I knew Patrick when he was in a fighting mood. I tried to dissuade him from the venture, but he swept all my pleas aside. He started up the iron stairway again, with me at his heels.

'There's no need for you to come. Wait below till I can let you out,' he said abruptly.

'No. I—I couldn't. Patrick—I'm sick with fear. Why don't you use the bell-ropes? They would help.'

'Don't be a nit-wit! How am I to free the bell-ropes? I can't cut them without a knife. Or were you suggesting that I should swarm up one and gnaw through the next?' he demanded mockingly.

I was silenced but unconvinced. I could feel disaster in every nerve of me. I had known fear before, often enough, but never like this.

'Couldn't you hide?' I suggested despairingly. 'I could scream from the tower till I made someone hear. Then, I could pretend that I'd got locked in here alone . . . and you could escape later.'

'It wouldn't work. Don't forget that someone knows I'm with you! Someone's out to wreck me.'

'You? Not me?'

'Why should anyone want to hurt you? You're not in a position to excite that dangerous kind of jealousy and hostility. What difference could it make to any of the other nurses, if you were sent home in disgrace?'

'You think someone is jealous of your position and eager to pull you down?'

'That's the strongest possibility, isn't it? I can't hit on any more plausible explanation,' he answered curtly.

I thought of his colleagues at St. Chad's. It was difficult to picture any of them hating and scheming and tricking Patrick like this. Mr. Manuden, the senior house-surgeon, was something of an autocrat, middle-aged and much too dignified to creep up on us and lock us into the belfry. Patrick's junior was a cheerful young man, big and blond and full of bonhomie. I certainly couldn't see him painstakingly forging those notes.

Patrick might have enemies among the medical students, but this type of trick seemed to be out of their sphere, too. It had an element of subtlety in it. Also, it argued an intimate knowledge of Patrick's private life. He, of all men, was unlikely to have revealed his private and personal affairs to strangers. I doubted if even his closest friends knew that I was his girl . . . or that he had a girl at all.

'I don't see how anyone can have forged those notes. No one knows us well enough. You haven't told anyone about—about us, have you?' I faltered.

'Good heavens, no!'

'Then, how can anyone have known?'

'From you, of course. You've talked too much and too freely. Girls always do . . . and you're no exception. You're hopelessly transparent.'

'I'm not. I've never told anyone about you.'

'Oh, don't upset yourself! Don't start weeping,' he said hastily. 'You couldn't have guessed that it would be twisted into a trap for me . . . with you as the bait.'

We emerged on to the roof again. I was breathing in deep gasps, but Patrick wasn't even panting. He turned and gave my hand a quick squeeze.

'It's all right, Lyn. Don't panic!' he said quietly. 'I'll soon have you out of this.'

Didn't he realize that my panic was all on his account, not on my own? I would willingly face the worst dressing-down of Matron's whole career and the severest penalties she could impose, if by so doing I could keep Patrick out of this. What was my career compared with his? He was one in thousands. I was merely one of thousands.

'I would much rather shout for help,' I said stubbornly 'After all, it isn't exactly a crime to be here together. Anyway, it might be one of the students who heard us . . . someone who wouldn't give us away.'

He flinched and his profile seemed to tauten again.

'That would be even worse . . . to be rescued by one of my own students. I should never live that down. You know how gossip exaggerates. I've no desire to feature in the hospital's history as the Don Juan of St. Chad's,' he said wryly. 'Here goes!'

Before I could protest again, he was over the parapet. For a moment, he remained there, suspended by his hands. In the moonlight, he looked fantastically long and lean. Then, as I held my breath painfully, he dropped lightly on to the thatched roof of the chapel.

He looked up and waved to me. I waved back unsteadily. Love and relief rushed together to swamp my misgivings. Pride was mixed in with them, too; pride in Patrick's ability to extricate us from a tight corner. He wasn't a natural athlete, as Val was. Apart from mountaineering and winter sports, Patrick had no out-of-doors interests. Games left him cold. He was wont to admit that the team spirit had been omitted from his make-up, that, in fact, he disliked all teams and their pursuits.

Of his courage and endurance, though, there was never any doubt. Both mentally and physically, he could make rings round Val and most other men. It was simply his intense purposefulness which prevented him from lavishing time and energy on anything except his work. Perhaps he even regretted his love for me, as a possible hindrance. There were occasions when I sensed that he was deliberately belittling it. He had a terror of being hindered or tied. Yet he couldn't thrust me out of his heart. That was why we were here.

He went down the thatch hand over hand; neatly, but at a perilous pace. Probably the thatch was slippery after a prolonged spell of dry weather.

Kneeling on the parapet, my eyes fixed on him feverishly,

I saw his hands fasten on to the guttering. Then, in a split second of agony, helpless and panic-stricken, I saw the guttering break away. Even so, he might have landed on the path below with nothing worse than a severe shaking. It was his speed which was his undoing. The impetus swung him over the narrow path to land on the grass among the fallen tombstones.

I cried out sharply. I peered down in terror. All I could distinguish was a dark, crumpled heap, half hidden from me by a drunkenly sprawling tombstone.

'Patrick! Patrick! Are you hurt?'

I flung caution to the winds and shouted down to him. He didn't move; didn't answer. He must be stunned, if nothing worse. I had to summon help now, at once. He might be badly hurt. I dared not wait.

I fled helter-skelter down that narrow, twisting stairway. It was a miracle that I didn't trip and hurtle down to land with a broken neck. Perhaps because I was beyond the fear of falling, I reached the bottom safely. I grabbed at the bell-ropes. I got hold of two of them and swung on them.

The answering clash of the bells overhead sounded unnaturally loud, as it reverberated through the tower. As one possessed, I tugged and tugged at the ropes, till I was wet through with a dreadful cold sweat. I didn't even pause to reflect on the result to staff and patients. What did I care if I roused the whole hospital? I could think only of Patrick.

I had lost all count of time. I couldn't have guessed how long I had been pulling on the ropes when the heavy oak door swung open and the beam of a torch was turned on me. I blinked in the sudden bright light. I stopped tugging and let the ropes swing. I felt as if I had left all the skin from the palms of my hands on the ropes.

'Nurse Shelley! Are you mad? What are you doing here, making all that noise?'

It was a sharp, familiar voice. I recognized it instantly as our Night Sister's.

She lowered the torch and, like a crisply starched avenging fury, waved me to the door. I stumbled out of the tower in front of her, my knees knocking together.

'Patrick,' I said desperately. 'Patrick Elbure . . . Have you found him?'

'What? Mr. Elbure?' she corrected me acidly. 'What about Mr. Elbure?'

'He's hurt. That's—that's why I was ringing the bells.'

'Really, Nurse, you sound as if you were intoxicated. Kindly pull yourself together.'

I turned away from her. I saw what looked like a ragged, improvised torch-light procession converging on the chapel.

'Here!' I said feverishly. 'Here!'

I forced my trembling legs to carry me over the uneven grass to the tombstone against which Patrick had fallen.

Someone else had forestalled me. Someone, white and ghostly in the moonlight, was kneeling beside him, murmuring his name in a shaken, passionate tone which I didn't recognize.

I cried out: 'Patrick! Patrick!' Behind me, Sister said: 'Nurse Shelley!' in an outraged tone.

The kneeling figure raised her head. I saw her white, ravaged face clearly by the light of Sister's torch. I gasped. It was Ursula. It seemed incredible that Ursula could be here, calling to Patrick in that passionate anguish and looking like a ghastly travesty of her usual serene self.

She stared up at me, and there was a cold, furious accusation in her eyes.

'You've killed him!' she said huskily. 'You've killed him.'

'I have? Oh, no! No. I tried to stop him. He would jump . . .' I stammered. 'The guttering gave way. He—he must have struck his head against that tombstone.'

'Nurse Shelley!' Sister repeated, even more severely. 'What are you doing here? Go back to the ward at once!'

There was a second's complete silence. Then it dawned on me that she was speaking to Ursula. Ursula didn't

appear to have heard her. She had one of Patrick's limp wrists in hers and was fumbling for his pulse.

I said desperately: 'Patrick . . . Mr. Elbure . . . is Ursula's stepbrother.'

Then, the head of the procession reached us. Instantly, we were surrounded. There was a barrage of torches and explanations and questions. Mercifully, the junior house-surgeon, looking bigger than ever, with wildly rumpled hair and a camel-hair ulster on over his pyjamas, was there to take charge.

In an incredibly short time, Patrick had been lifted on to a stretcher and was being carried off to the Casualty Ward, with Night Sister and the house-surgeon walking beside him.

He hadn't moved. He hadn't spoken. He hadn't even groaned.

It was worse than a nightmare. Nothing as terrible as this had ever happened to me in a nightmare. For a moment or two I was paralysed by fear. I couldn't even think. I was as silent and motionless as that long figure on the stretcher.

As if from a great distance, I heard the confusion of voices around me, questioning, speculating, and trying to make sense out of what had happened. I saw Ursula, still ashy-pale but with a mask-like composure, turn and walk away towards the building which contained the Children's Wards. Again, I had a chilled feeling, as if she were suddenly turning her back on me; washing her hands of me.

I wanted to cry out to her. I wanted to run after her and be comforted by her serenity and sound common sense, as I had been comforted so often in my childhood. I loved Ursula as an elder sister. I relied on her. She was a kind of anchor to me. It didn't seem possible that she should be dissociating herself from me, now, of all times, when we were both distracted with fears for Patrick.

A Staff Nurse and a probationer, in uniform as she was, went scurrying after her. I remembered belatedly that

Ursula was on night duty. That, of course, was why she had been one of the first to reach the chapel. That, no doubt, was why she was hurrying back to the ward now. Her sense of duty was unshakable. I couldn't expect her to put any emotional claims before it.

A small, prim-faced Sister, whom I scarcely knew, took me by the arm.

'I don't know what you imagine you're doing here, in that unsuitable clothing, Nurse,' she said tartly. 'You can explain yourself to Matron in the morning. Now, I suggest that you go back to bed.'

Her bony fingers and tart voice penetrated my coma. I broke away from her. I broke away from the group which was still clustered around me. I ran blindly after the stretcher.

'Patrick,' I said feverishly. 'Patrick, please, please speak to me . . .'

Night Sister tried to pull me away from the stretcher, but I clutched the side of it desperately. I had to hear his voice again; I had to be certain that he wasn't dead.

'Patrick, please . . .'

His eyelids lifted. He looked up at me in a dazed, unfocused fashion.

'Darling, are you all right?' I gasped.

'That note . . .'

His voice was a mere thread, but it *was* his voice.

'Don't worry about that,' I said in tremulous relief. 'I'll explain. I'll take all the blame. You can show everyone the note you got. I—I've already destroyed the other.'

'You've destroyed the note? You've destroyed *me* . . .'

he said faintly, but with a dreadful emphasis. Then, his eyelids drooped again.

CHAPTER IV

With women the heart argues, not the mind.

MATTHEW ARNOID

'Evelyn! Eve, wake up!' Rosemary hissed in my ear.

'I'm not asleep.'

I sat up with a jerk. It was no use lying with my face to the wall. At home, I might have been left in peace . . . if there ever could be any peace for me again. Not here. St. Chad's made no allowances or provisions for aching hearts and tortured minds.

'How queer you look! Eve, were you mixed up in that frightful commotion in the small hours?' Rosemary demanded, staring from me to the grimy slacks and jersey which lay sprawled on the floor where I had shed them. 'What on earth was it? Some wit suggested that Matron had died in an apoplectic fit and that the medical students were tolling the bell for her. Most people thought the building must be on fire.'

'Oh!'

'Oh? Is that all you can say? Oh?' she mimicked me. 'Snap out of it and give . . .'

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything, of course. Sister Tutor came over and sent us all back to bed before we could gather any genuine information. All she would tell us was that there had been an accident in the belfry tower and that a nurse had rung the bells to summon help.'

'I rang the bells,' I said dully, dragging my aching limbs out of bed. 'Someone locked me in the belfry.'

'Locked you in the belfry? Heaven above! What were you doing in the belfry in the middle of the night?' she asked, as if she thought I was raving. 'Sleep-walking?'

'No. I—I was tricked into going there. I'll tell you all about it later,' I said hurriedly.

What was I to tell her? What was I to tell Matron? Not that I had been tricked by a forged note. They might not believe that, especially as I couldn't produce the note. Alternatively, they might jump to the conclusion that the note had been authentic, and that would be disastrous for Patrick.

How best could I spare him? By denying or admitting that I had begged him to meet me in the belfry? His reputation was all that mattered. It was torture to know that he had been injured physically through me. His reputation mustn't be damaged, too. Somehow, I had to put him in the clear.

'You look pretty grim. Why don't you go sick?' Rosemary said concernedly. 'My goodness! What have you done to your hands?'

'Scraped them on the bell-ropes. That's nothing.'

'I don't get it. Surely you weren't in the belfry alone?' I shook my head.

'Oh, all right! If you won't talk . . .' She made an exasperated gesture. 'I suppose St. Ursula is mixed up in this affair somewhere.'

'Ursula? Oh, no! Of course not.'

'Then, it'll be the first time,' Rosemary said darkly.

'The first time?' I echoed stupidly.

'The first time that St. Ursula wasn't at the bottom of one of your spots of bother. That woman has a positive genius for throwing mud . . . and keeping her own hands clean.'

'You're talking nonsense,' I said wearily.

There was no time for more. The clock in the belfry was beginning to chime the hour. I wondered inconsequently if I should ever hear it again without an inward shudder.

'Come on! Hurry!' Rosemary said imperatively.

She took my cap from my unsteady fingers and pinned it on for me. She found a clean apron. She finished my

dressing as if I had been a puppet. Then, she seized my arm and ran me downstairs.

'I don't want any breakfast,' I panted, when we were scurrying across the quad to the dining-hall. 'Let me go. I'll see you later.'

'Go? Where?'

'To Casualty Ward.'

'Why? Who's hurt?'

I wouldn't answer. It was senseless, I supposed, because, if Patrick had been seriously injured, everyone would have to know. I was clinging desperately to a forlorn hope, though; the hope that he had only been stunned by the fall. If he was on his feet again this morning, mightn't it be possible to hush up his part in the episode? Need anyone know that we had been locked in the belfry together?

Night Sister was, as yet, the only person who knew that I had been locked in the belfry. She would report me to Matron, of course, but couldn't the story stop there? She wouldn't want to hurt Patrick. All the staff admired Patrick and took a pride in his brilliance. Wouldn't they cover up for him?

I ran from Rosemary; from the affectionate concern and reproach in her eyes. I ran all the way to Casualty Ward. I wasn't going to ask for permission to see Patrick. I suspected that it would be refused. I marched boldly into the ward, as if I was on duty there.

It was the hour of organized hustle and apparent confusion, with the night staff clearing up before handing over to those on day duty. No one paid any attention to me as I walked purposefully through the ward.

I reached the end beds . . . and a dreadful sick, empty feeling began to gnaw at my stomach. Patrick wasn't there. All the beds were occupied by strangers. I leaned against the wall, weak at the knees and trembling.

Relief came in the person of Harriet Greenways, tall, irritatingly prim and correct, but one of my own year. She raised sandy eyebrows as she caught sight of me.

'Why, Evelyn Shelley, what do you want? You haven't been transferred to us, have you?'

It was characteristic of Harriet that she should appropriate the whole ward and think of it as hers. She would make an excellent nurse, of the coldly efficient, managing variety, never failing a patient but never forgetting her own personal dignity. I saw her future as if it were written in her narrow, humourless face. I often had such flashes of insight . . . always when I wasn't even interested in the subject of them.

I said defensively: 'I'm looking for Mr. Elbure. I was told that he had been brought here.'

'Oh, yes! So he was. In the middle of the night. Such a commotion we had,' Harriet answered, rapidly and importantly. 'I was sent to haul Theatre Sister out of bed. She had all her hair in curlers and was pretty short with me. When she heard what had happened, she got ready at lightning speed.'

'What—what exactly had happened? To him, I mean?'

'If you want the details, you'd better apply to Mr. Manuden. He operated,' Harriet said flatly.

'You must have heard something . . .'

'Only a crazy rumour that he was climbing the belfry tower from outside for a wager, lost his footing, and fell. He smashed his right arm against a gravestone,' Harriet said matter-of-factly.

'Smashed it? Broke it?'

'It wasn't just a simple fracture. I don't know quite how serious the damage is. None of the high-ups confides in me,' she retorted quizzically.

'Oh! Well, where is he?'

'In one of the private wards.'

'I've got to see him.'

'Not without Sister's permission,' Harriet said firmly. 'If you like, I'll ask her for you.'

She stalked off in search of Sister. I retreated to the passage beyond the ward. I had a sudden fear that I was going to be sick or faint or do something equally futile.

Sister Casualty came rustling out to survey me uneasily. She was a kindly soul, who looked perpetually hot and harassed. Her fair hair was always straying out from under her cap in untidy wisps, and her small, indeterminate nose was always shining.

'Oh—er—Nurse Shelley? You have a message for Mr Elbure?' she asked, as if baffled by my presence here. 'Who sent you?'

'I—I'm related to Mr. Elbure. I think he'll want to see me,' I answered desperately.

'At this hour of the morning? That's highly irregular, Nurse,' Sister said in a flustered fashion. 'I'm not even sure that Mr. Elbure will be allowed any visitors today.'

'He'll be allowed to see me,' I said, with more confidence than I felt. 'I'll only stay a few minutes. Please, Sister . . .'

Any of the other Sisters would probably have sent me about my business. Sister Casualty hesitated . . . and weakened.

'Wait here, then, Nurse. I'll see if Mr. Elbure is awake.'

She rustled away down the corridor. Harriet gave me an odd, speculative glance, then went back to the ward. I waited for what seemed an eternity. I tried to pray . . . as I had been trying all night, but the only words which would come to me were: 'For all those afflicted and distressed, in mind, body, and estate . . .'

That included practically everyone in St. Chad's . . . at least among the patients, and perhaps among the staff, too. Sometimes, I was overwhelmed mentally by the thought of all the suffering which was concentrated within the walls of a hospital. I could feel the weight of it bearing down on me relentlessly.

Then, I would long to do something crazy and frivolous by way of escape. If that was impossible, I would take myself to task and wonder wretchedly if I had no real vocation for nursing. I would torture myself with the fear that I had chosen my profession simply in order to be

near Patrick, and to gain some understanding of the work to which he was dedicated.

I knew that to back out now wouldn't be any good. If I never entered a hospital ward again, I should still be haunted and burdened by my memories. My only course was to strive desperately to acquire an outward composure, without suppressing my inward sympathy. Ursula could combine the two perfectly. Why couldn't I?

Sister was brushing wisps of hair abstractedly from her flushed forehead, as she came padding back to me. She looked at me with a kind of puzzled compassion.

'I'm sorry, Nurse. Mr. Elbure is awake, but he doesn't wish to be disturbed.'

'Oh!' I caught my breath sharply. 'Did—did you tell him that Evelyn Shelley wanted to see him?'

'Yes, Nurse.' She cleared her throat. 'He doesn't want to see you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure. In fact, he said: "For heaven's sake, keep her away from me, Sister!" He was most emphatic,' she said, her forehead puckering. 'Dear me, Nurse! You're a very bad colour. Aren't you well?'

'I'm all right. Just worried about . . . about him,' I said miserably. 'How is he, Sister?'

'As well as can be expected.'

It was the hateful, stock retort. I suddenly wondered how many anxious relatives had been chilled and rebuffed by it. It seemed all wrong to apply such a meaningless formula to the anguish of suspense which so many families had to endure when a loved one was in hospital.

Often it was flung at them by a busy nurse who had never even seen the patient in question. There were variations, of course, like 'Quite comfortable', or 'Getting on nicely'. I myself had used them, from force of habit. I made a desperate mental vow that I would never take refuge behind them again. I would find something genuine, something personal, to say.

'He isn't in any danger?'

'Oh, no! Certainly not.'

'Then why . . . why didn't he want to see me?'

'I'm afraid I don't know. It may be that he doesn't feel like talking about the accident yet, even to a relative. You're his stepsister, I think? That's not a blood relation,' she reminded me. 'Now, Nurse, you really must pull yourself together. You're positively trembling. If you're feeling faint, you'd better report sick.'

'Yes. Thank you, Sister. You've been very kind,' I said numbly. 'Would you just tell me this? Is—is his arm badly damaged?'

'Quite badly, I believe, but we must hope not irreparably. He couldn't be in better hands than Mr. Manuden's.'

'His own are better . . . or will be,' I thought dully. 'Mr. Manuden is too conservative. He's afraid to take chances. Patrick isn't. Patrick has a kind of inspired recklessness. Everyone who's watched him says so. Oh, he can't have damaged his arm badly! He can't. It would be too cruel.'

Somehow, I got away . . . out of the ward, out of the building, and into the open air. The sun was shining brilliantly in a cloudless blue sky. The daffodils in the formal beds bordering the quad were a bright yellow . . . too bright. Everything, even the grass and the first unfolding leaves around the boles of the elm trees beyond the chapel, seemed unnaturally bright in the sunshine. There was a heartlessness about the fresh, vivid colours and the unclouded sky which mocked my inward misery.

Why, oh, why had Patrick refused to see me? Why had he denied me that crumb of comfort? Because he was still concerned with our reputations? Because he was trying to prevent our names from being linked together? Surely, it was too late for that? Wouldn't it be wiser to play on the connection between us? We were connections by marriage, if not actual relatives. My aunt was his step-mother, and my cousin was his stepsister. He called my father 'Uncle' and his father was my godfather.

He might have seen me, if only to coach me in my version

of our disastrous night. Why had he asked Sister to keep me away from him? It couldn't be that he blamed me for the accident, could it? He knew that I had been tricked into that midnight meeting, just as he had. If he hadn't spotted the forgery, could he expect that I should have spotted it?

We were both innocent victims of a peculiarly revolting trick. The result was of Patrick's seeking, not mine. I would have stopped him from that dangerous means of escape, had he listened to me. Didn't he remember that?

The quad was unfamiliarly silent and deserted. The day staff had gone on duty. The night staff must be in the dining-hall now, having breakfast before they retired. Should I hang about until they emerged, and try to contact Ursula?

She had turned on me in the graveyard in a most savage and un-Ursula-like manner. That must have been simply the result of shock . . . the shock of finding Patrick unconscious. She would be her usual serene, sane, comforting self this morning, wouldn't she? With her keen perception, she would see how desperately I needed reassurance from someone of my own family.

I would have given anything to have been able to run to Father, to sit on his knee, as if I were a child again, and to sob out the whole miserable story. If he were to tell me that I was not to reproach myself, I should feel absolved from this unnerving sense of guilt. If he were to pray for Patrick, I should feel confident that his prayers would be answered. 'The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man' seemed a long way removed from my despairing and confused petitions.

Even Aunt Beatrice, with her crisp common sense and underlying but unemotional kindness, would have been a prop and stand-by. Even Val, with his breezy good-humour and innate refusal to be rattled, would have steadied my throbbing, ragged nerves.

Only . . . I wasn't a child now, to run home, weeping, the moment I was hurt. Somehow, I had to live through

this nightmarish, intolerably spring-like day, without any support from my nearest and dearest. I couldn't look to Ursula for comfort. Not this time. I couldn't forget the husky passion in her voice, when she had knelt beside Patrick, feeling for his pulse.

I had never before seen Ursula so near a breakdown; so devoid of armour. I didn't want to admit, even to myself, that she, too, was in love with Patrick. If she were, it would create an intolerable situation between the three of us. I couldn't bear to hurt Ursula, but not for anyone on earth would I surrender Patrick. He was my whole life. Without him, I should be just a nebulous shadow.

Mechanically, I had been walking towards the Children's Wards. After the brilliant sunshine outside, the bare hall seemed pitch dark. I hesitated, blinking, and saw Rosemary emerging from the telephone box by the stairs.

She pounced on me, grabbing my arm, and giving me an impatiently affectionate shake.

'Where have you been, Eve! I've phoned the hostel and the dining-hall and no one had a clue.'

'I was in Casualty. Why?'

'Matron wants you. You're to report to her immediately.'

CHAPTER V

Dare to be true; nothing can need a lie.

G. HERBERT

Matron couldn't be called 'little', because she was five foot eight and sturdily built, but she was certainly 'fierce'. She had a wonderful flow of invective, calculated to seep through the toughest hide.

It was when she brought Father into it that my numbness wore off and I felt my temper beginning to quiver ominously.

'Can't we leave my father out of it? Don't you see how unfair it is to expect a clergyman's daughter to be a model of all the virtues?' I flashed. 'I'm as human as anyone else's daughter, and just as likely to make mistakes.'

'Not as likely to be an accomplished liar . . . or so I should have hoped,' Matron retorted crushingly. 'Frankly, I find your explanation pitifully weak and unconvincing. Do you seriously expect me to believe that some anonymous person tricked you into visiting the belfry tower at midnight? That this same, unnamed person, who tricked you, also tricked Mr. Elbure into meeting you there, and ended by locking the door on you both?'

'That's what happened,' I said stubbornly.

I hadn't been able to decide how much or how little to reveal, so I had told the plain truth, as briefly as possible. Now it seemed that I should have been wiser to have prevaricated.

'A fantastic story. An insult to my intelligence,' Matron snapped. 'Forged notes, indeed? You'll be telling me next that counterfeiters are at work in St. Chad's, complete with printing press.'

I had always disliked Matron when she became heavily

sarcastic. I had to bite my lower lip savagely to restrain an angry answer.

'I'm waiting, Nurse,' she said sharply.

'For what, Matron?'

'For you to amend your ridiculous fabrications. Where, pray, are these skilful forgeries you mention?'

'I destroyed the note I received.'

'Indeed! How convenient! Or should I say "what foresight"? Obviously, you realized that it wouldn't be reliable evidence . . . if it ever existed, except in your imagination.'

'I don't like being called a liar, Matron. It's one of those things one needn't take . . . even from you.'

'And I don't like your manner, Nurse. It's no use trying to brazen out this disgraceful affair. The truth will serve you best.'

'If you don't recognize the truth when you hear it, is that my fault? I won't be played with like a mouse in a cat's paws. If you want me to go, I'll go at once,' I said stormily.

To my blank surprise, her broad, florid face evinced a wintry smile at that.

'Hot-headed and impetuous as always! You've caused quite a lot of trouble since you came to us, by your refusal or inability to conform,' she said consideringly. 'If I could tell you that you had no vocation for nursing, I would gladly wash my hands of you.'

'Perhaps I haven't any vocation for nursing.'

'If you hadn't, you would scarcely have been elected May Queen. Nor would Sister Tutor have visited me this morning, to plead for you. If it hadn't been for her intervention, I should have been disposed to send you away forthwith,' she said severely. 'It's not necessary for me to repeat the infringements of which you're guilty. From your defiant attitude, I conclude that this wasn't by any means the first of such escapades.'

'Oh, but it was! I've never been out in the grounds at midnight before'

'I wish I could believe you.'

'If you don't—if you can't—I'd better go.'

'And jeopardize your whole future? Isn't it a pity to throw away the fruits of nearly three years' work? Good, conscientious work, too. I'll grant you that,' she conceded. 'Sister Tutor begs that you should be allowed to take your finals. Are you ready to forgo that privilege in a fit of pique?'

'I want to qualify. Naturally,' I said stonily. 'I've been a fool, I know. I'm sorry. Only, I can't grovel.'

'No one is expecting you to grovel, Nurse. At my time of life, one ceases to expect miracles,' she said, with a grim smile. 'All I'm looking for is some sign of penitence; some realization that your surreptitious flirtation may have robbed us of a brilliant surgeon.'

'No. Oh, no! Not that. Please,' I said brokenly. 'Don't torture me. Tell me the truth about—about him.'

'It's too soon to be certain . . . Mr. Manuden is hopeful. I can't put it more strongly than that. It was the broken bottle which did the dangerous damage.'

'Broken bottle?'

'In the grass. The fractures of the arm itself will mend, given time. The broken glass slashed through the wrist and two fingers. If those fingers don't regain their normal elasticity . . .' She stopped abruptly. She looked at me for the first time with something approaching compassion. 'The results of the episode are beside the point. Indirectly you're responsible for a young mother's losing her first baby and for an old man's dying in a heart attack. When you pealed those bells, you didn't stop to think of the effect on nervous patients, did you?'

'No. I had to get help for Patrick . . . for Mr. Elbure. I didn't think of anything else.'

'That's honest, at least. You imagine that you're in love with him, I presume?'

'Yes. Only, it isn't imagination. I've loved him for a long, long time.'

'A pity. A great pity.'

'Why, Matron?'

'A man may be brilliant in his own line—and yet far from estimable as a human being. You've tried to cover up for Mr. Elbure, but I fear I must accept his version rather than yours.'

'His?' I echoed apprehensively. 'Isn't his the same as mine?'

'No. Didn't it enter your young and foolish head that a man who could propose such a meeting was lacking in any sense of responsibility towards you? Didn't you even ask yourself if that was how a man would treat a girl whom he hoped to marry?'

I shook my head dazedly.

'But . . . but . . . he didn't write that note. He denied it.'

'Not to me. He asked to see me early this morning. He admitted frankly that he had enticed you to the belfry . . . by way of a diversion. The jamming of the tower door was a complication which, naturally, he didn't foresee.'

'Oh, but it wasn't like that! The door was locked on us. Night Sister had to unlock it.'

'She says not. She says the door was stiff, but not locked. I'm afraid it was a guilty conscience which made you both leap to a false conclusion.'

I didn't know what to say. She had taken my breath away by the admission made by Patrick. Then, the note had been from him? It hadn't been forged? And he hadn't received any note purporting to come from me?

'It doesn't make sense. Why should he lie to me?' I said, thinking aloud. 'Why pretend that I had sent for him?'

'Some men have a perverse sense of humour.'

'Not Patrick. He isn't like that. Oh, please believe me! I know him so awfully well. I don't understand why he's given you such a distorted version, but I swear it isn't true. He would never have tried to treat me as a diversion.'

He would never have asked me to meet him at such a time and place.'

'That wasn't your impression when you received his note and responded to it.'

'No. I know. I was every kind of a fool. It took me by surprise. I thought something dreadful had happened, which made it imperative for us to meet.'

'I'm afraid, Nurse, that you didn't think at all. In your foolish infatuation you went rushing off to your own—and his—destruction.'

'Don't!' I said flinching.

That was what Patrick had said to me . . . his final comment . . . that I had destroyed him. Had he meant it? But . . . what else could I have done? If I hadn't summoned help, he might have died. He had been unconscious, and I, imprisoned in the tower, couldn't gauge how severe his injuries were.

'I'm not excusing you by putting the major share of the blame on him,' Matron went on inexorably. 'Even if you were under his influence, you're still answerable for your own actions. Moreover, when it's a question of discipline, I can't make any exceptions. You're due for some leave, I believe?'

'Yes. I was waiting till—till my cousin, Ursula, was due for hers. Then, we were going home together.'

'Instead, I propose to send you home on Monday, on indefinite leave.'

'Oh! Does—does that mean that I'm not to come back?'

'No. It means that you are suspended from duty for the time being. It also means that you will not be present at the May Day festivities . . . in any capacity.'

'Oh, that?'

Was it only a few days ago that I had been so naïvely thrilled by my election? It didn't seem possible that one could plunge so steeply and rapidly from the heights to the depths.

'This disgraceful affair will inevitably cause unpleasant gossip, but St. Chad's must give the gossips as little food

as possible,' Matron pronounced. 'It's for the sake of our reputation, more than for Mr. Elbure's or yours, that the facts will not be made public. You have gone home for Easter; Mr. Elbure is seriously ill and can't be questioned. That will be my answer to all inquiries. Can I trust you to be equally discreet?'

'Yes. Of course. Only, please, Matron, may I see Patrick before I go?'

'No. He doesn't wish to see you. He has made that quite clear.'

'Why? I can't understand it.'

'A guilty conscience, perhaps.'

'Oh, no! He hasn't a guilty conscience.'

'Then, he should have. A man of his age and in his position should have known better than to amuse himself with an impressionable young girl,' Matron said severely. 'I'm bitterly disappointed in Patrick Elbure. And not I alone. Mr. Manuden feels the same way.'

'Everyone here—including you, Matron—thought the world of Patrick. Yet you can believe that—that he was amusing himself by inciting me to break stringent rules and meet him at midnight; when he was on call, too. Oh, how can you turn against him and believe such nonsense? I don't know what's behind it all, but I do know that he could never behave like that—selfishly and irresponsibly. Let me see him and ask him why he's telling this stupid story.'

'I can't go against his express wishes, Nurse. If you take my advice, you'll try to put him out of your thoughts. You're young enough to make a fresh start.'

'Here?' I said bitterly.

'No. You can come back to finish your time here and take your finals, but I may as well make it clear to you now that there won't be any place for you on the permanent staff.'

'Then, I am being virtually dismissed in disgrace?'

'Scarcely. The fact is that you're not suitable for a Staff Nurse in a mixed hospital like St. Chad's. You're too

much of a responsibility. Frankly, you're a great deal too attractive to the opposite sex.'

'I am? Oh, no, Matron!'

'I keep my eyes and ears open. My only wonder is that you haven't got yourself into an emotional *débâcle* before this.'

It seemed extraordinary that a woman of Matron's years and experience could be so mistaken in her judgment. Did she really see me as a youthful *femme fatale*? That was about as accurate as her picture of Patrick as a gay philanderer.

Presumably, she had been deceived by my smoke-screen. I had tried to convey the impression that I was ready to play the field. Apparently, I had succeeded.

It wasn't worth arguing about now. Except that I didn't relish the prospect of being sent home in disgrace, I didn't greatly care what Matron thought of me. In her own particular fashion, she was trying to be kind; trying to save what was left of my reputation and prevent me from throwing away the years I had spent here. She didn't trust me, though; didn't believe my story. I should never be able to forget that.

'You're excused any further duty, Nurse. No doubt you're tired after your disturbed night. I suggest that you retire to your room,' she said dryly. 'Later, when you're rested, you can do your packing.'

Again, it didn't seem worth while protesting. My head was throbbing violently, but my feet and hands were ice-cold. My own future might be lost in the mists, but what did that matter? I was obsessed with fears for Patrick's. If his fingers were permanently damaged, what would he do? How would he bear such a shattering blow?

Presumably, he would go home to nurse his injuries. Was that why Matron was sending me home? Did she foresee that he would need all the compensations and consolations I could offer him? Or did she hope that our respective fathers would intervene? Was she really convinced that Patrick had been making a fool of me?

Why had he lied about that note? To whom had he lied? To me—or to Matron? I tried to recall what he had said about it in the tower, but it was all confused in my mind now.

The telephone bell rang shrilly on Matron's desk. She lifted the receiver. I got up, then hesitated. Had she dismissed me? I didn't want to appear to slink away while her attention was engaged, but surely she had finished with me now?

She stayed me by an imperative gesture. I remained standing, scarcely listening to her brief telephone conversation. There was an ominous pricking behind my eyeballs. I must get away quickly, before I had to endure the final humiliation of bursting into tears in Matron's office.

She put down the receiver and turned to me again
'Your cousin is here.'

'My cousin? Ursula?' I echoed blankly.

'No. A Mr Valentine Elbure.'

'Oh! Val! Why? I mean, how?' I said confusedly.

'He's over at the hostel. The porter says he insists on seeing you. I take it that he's related to Patrick Elbure?'

'Yes.'

'Very well, Nurse. You may go. Try to get rid of your cousin quietly, without giving rise to any further gossip.'

She laid a stinging emphasis on the words 'your cousin', as if she were aware that Val and I were the merest connections. I was beyond caring. It was enough to know that, by some miracle or other, Val was here

CHAPTER VI

Two loves I have of comfort and despair.

W SHAKESPLARE

A big, wide, vividly green car was drawn up on the gravel in front of the hostel. I didn't recognize it, but that meant nothing. Val was noticeably extravagant. It was more than likely that he had acquired a new car since I had last seen him, just before Christmas.

He was the solitary occupant of the waiting-room cum office. Even so, he looked much too big for it. He was shorter than Patrick but more heavily built. He always reminded me of an inferior imitation of his elder brother. Instead of Patrick's long, lean, well bred look, Val was all squares.

Val had a squarish forehead, a square shaped face and a square jaw. His shoulders were square and so, apparently, were his hips. His hair couldn't be called auburn. It was a flaming, uncompromising red. I or most of the year, his skin very nearly matched it. Instead of remaining a warm cream, like Ursula's, or turning a deep bronze like Patrick's and mine, Val's was burnt an ugly, brick-red by contact with the sunshine.

This morning, I was in no mood to be critical, though. He opened his arms in one of his sweeping, extravagant gestures, and I ran into them. He held me against him soothingly, as if I were a frightened child. The feel of him was blessedly solid and comforting.

I said: 'Val . . . Val' and choked on a sob.

'Steady now,' he said, in his unruffled fashion. 'What's all this rumpus in aid of? What's been going on around here?'

Patrick

'I gathered that he'd taken a toss. What about you?'

'I'm all right. How did you hear about it?'

'Matron telephoned to Father. I was up in the Tamar Valley, on a job, so Aunt Beatrice rang me up and suggested that I should investigate.'

'I can't think how you got here so soon, but it's bliss to see you.'

'Soon? It's nearly mid-day.'

'Is it really? Where has the morning gone? Of course, I had to wait quite a while in Matron's office, till she'd done her rounds. And then she was hammering at me for ages. I seem to have lost all count of time.'

'You look slightly distracted. Probably, you were too agitated to eat any breakfast.'

'Of course I was. Patrick . . . Patrick's badly hurt.'

'Suppose you go and remove that cap and apron, while I have a word with Pat? Then, I'll take you out and feed you.'

'Oh, no! I can't go out with you. I'm in disgrace.'

He sat down on the small, formal sofa and drew me down beside him. He kept an arm round me protectively, while I stammered out a somewhat incoherent account of the night's disasters.

'Did you ask Pat to meet you in the belfry?' Val inquired calmly when I had finished.

'Oh, no! No. Of course not.'

'Did you ask him to take a header off the tower?'

'No. Certainly not. I tried to stop him.'

'Then, what the dickens are you feeling guilty about, you little muggins? You're the innocent victim, aren't you?'

'Well, yes. We were both victims. At least, I'm sure Patrick was. I can't understand his story to Matron.'

'Don't let it worry you. It's his story,' Val said easily.

'I know. I'm not really worried about that. All that matters is how badly he's hurt. Do try to find out, Val! This suspense is unnerving.'

'You're unnerving yourself, Baby. Stop it,' he said

firmly. 'Go and put some lipstick on those deplorably pale lips and powder that enchanting nose of yours. I can't possibly take a white-faced wreck out to lunch.'

'Oh, Val, you are absurd!'

'Not at all. I have my reputation to consider. I'm not in the habit of reducing lovely young girls to a state of quiver and dither. Brace up, now!'

He more or less lifted me to my feet and gave me a playful slap on my hind-quarters. I made a horrific face at him, but I went off obediently to change.

Matron had told me I was excused further duty. She had also told me to get rid of my cousin quietly. Putting the two orders together, I could easily add them up to lunch with Val.

Ursula had sometimes deplored Val's cheerful, matter-of-fact outlook. She had said he lacked ideals and ambitions and sensitivity; that he was hopelessly shallow and commonplace. To my shame, I had agreed with her. I had slipped into her habit of disparaging and despising Val.

It was those very qualities in him, so patronizingly derided by us, that made me cling to him now. His essentially normal outlook was an antidote to my nervous imaginings. His refusal to panic quieted my panic. His flippancy was exasperating, of course, but it was a relief to be able to feel exasperation, instead of any more intense emotion.

I changed hurriedly into my best coat and skirt—green, with light tan accessories. I powdered my face and reddened my lips. I still looked pale and drawn, but not noticeably haggard. The lipstick helped. It helped my morale, as well as my looks.

Perhaps Matron had deliberately frightened me, in an attempt to make the punishment fit the crime. Perhaps there wasn't really any need to agonize over Patrick's injuries. He was young and in excellent condition. Why shouldn't they heal swiftly and cleanly?

I had stopped 'quivering and dithering' by the time Val

called back for me. He gave me an approving nod.

'Nice,' he said, and opened the car door with a flourish. 'Please admire my eye for colour. Is or isn't this *your* green?'

'What? Do you expect me to believe that you chose a new car in my favourite shade?'

'What's so odd about that? Aren't you my favourite filly—with nothing barred?'

'Am I?' His wide grin was curiously comforting. I relaxed against the smooth green leather cushions. 'You saw Patrick? How is he?'

'He'll survive.'

'That's no answer.'

'He's in a foul temper, if that's the kind of answer you want. He more or less told me to go to blazes . . . and to take you with me. So I said "O.K.!" and buzzed off. Don't worry! He'll simmer down presently.'

'But . . . his arm? His hand? How severe is the damage?'

'Bad enough, but not past praying for. Naturally, he's in a stew about his precious fingers, but I'll bet you any money that they'll be as good as new in a few months' time.'

'Honestly? You're not just trying to comfort me?'

'If I were, I should say a few weeks' time. It'll be a fairly long business, according to that starchy, grey-headed fellow, but he doesn't doubt that Pat will recover the use of his fingers completely.'

'Oh! You saw Mr. Manuden?'

'Is that his name? It goes nicely with his general pomposity. I also saw an assortment of the nursing staff—none of them a patch on you, my pretty one—including two Sisters and Matron.'

I wondered inconsequently what they had thought of him. They must have marvelled at the difference between him and Patrick. Had they been shocked by Val's irrepressible, breezy manner or had they found him a refreshing change? It was rarely indeed that a man so full

of vitality, good humour, and happy-go-lucky charm entered the portals of St. Chad's. He was as out of place in this temple of healing and learning as a performing elephant.

'Here we go!' He blew a little fanfare on the horn as he let in the clutch. 'Full steam ahead!'

'Val, behave!' I said reproachfully. 'This is a hospital.'

'Glad you told me, darling. I might have mistaken it for either a convent or else a morgue.' He grinned at me, unabashed. 'For myself, I loathe hushed voices and tip-toes when I'm sick. I'd rather be reminded of the world outside. Look! Those bed cases on the balcony are sitting up and taking notice . . .'

He touched his fingers to his lips and waved gaily at the women's open-air ward which we were passing. At least half the patients waved back to him. He blew another fanfare in acknowledgement.

'I see what you mean,' I conceded. 'Only, it depends whether one's desperately ill, or just bored by a slow recovery, like those cases on the balcony. I suppose to them you're a welcome diversion.'

I tried to see him through a stranger's eyes. With his flaming hair and big, gleaming green car, he must suggest a conspicuous and not unendearing personality.

I glanced back and saw that Sister had come out on to the balcony to stare after the car.

'People will think you're dreadfully callous, to be in such high spirits when your brother has just had a nasty accident,' I said uneasily.

'Do you expect me to weep crocodile tears, because my esteemed elder brother has come a cropper for once? It won't hurt him. It may teach him not to be so confidently sure of himself.'

'He isn't. Or, if he is, he has a right to be.'

'No one has a right to Pat's colossal arrogance.'

He spoke calmly enough, but I was disconcerted by the emphasis in his tone. Val was the only person who still addressed Patrick by the childish abbreviation—'Pat'. He

was also, I realized suddenly, the only person who sought consistently to deflate and belittle Patrick.

'Aren't you proud of him? You should be,' I said impulsively.

'Why? He may be good at his job, but that's not exceptional. I'm equally good at mine, and I don't expect impressionable females to regard me with awe-stricken eyes,' he retorted. 'Why all this glamour about a surgeon? It doesn't cling to butchers, who also wield knives skilfully.'

'Don't be horrid! Patrick is exceptional. Exceptionally brilliant.'

He shrugged his massive shoulders. Was he jealous of Patrick? I had never thought about it before, but it came home to me now that Val had always been relegated to the background. No one in our immediate circle ever hovered round him or made a fuss of him or troubled to study his preferences. He must have noticed that he fell a long way short of Patrick's niche in the general affection and admiration. It hadn't crossed my mind till now that Val might resent always being forced to take second place.

'Are you jealous of Patrick?' I asked reproachfully. 'I might just as well be jealous of Ursula.'

'Aren't you?'

'Of course not. That would be plain silly. I can't hope to compete with Ursula. Is that her fault? Ought I to bear her a grudge, because she's cleverer and better-looking and sweeter tempered than I could ever be?'

'You under-estimate yourself. I don't. I don't under-estimate either of us,' Val said easily. 'I don't admit that I can't compete with Pat. Brilliance isn't the whole story. Pertinacity can bring equally handsome rewards. I would back myself to out-stay him, any day.'

'To out-stay a welcome, do you mean?'

'To hang on, and not to let go.'

'Of what?'

'Of *you*, perhaps.'

'Of me?' I stared at him blankly.

'Didn't you know? Were you always so dazzled by Pat

that you were blind to my much kinder and more weather-worthy love?’

‘Are you trying to make me rise?’ I asked uncertainly.

‘No. Just dropping you a friendly hint.’

‘That you—you love me?’ I said incredulously.

‘Is it so difficult to believe?’

‘Yes. Not merely difficult. Impossible. And—and you’re impossible, too,’ I said in exasperation. ‘What a time to talk about love!’

‘I thought you might be hungry emotionally, as well as physically. Isn’t it any consolation to know that, whatever happens, you’ll always have me behind you, waiting to pick you up and dust you down?’

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I couldn’t believe that he was serious. If he was, he was talking about a different kind of love—an elder-brotherly, protective affection. Naturally, there was some comfort in feeling that he was fond of me and eager to champion me. Some . . . but not much. No one but Patrick could satisfy the hunger in my heart.

‘Poor Baby!’ Val said, with a swift reversion to his normal, breezy manner. ‘You’re spinning round in circles. You’ll feel better after you’ve been fed.’

‘That observation is utterly characteristic of you,’ I said crushingly. ‘You’re the most matter-of-fact, down-to-earth person I’ve ever met.’

‘Not such a bad thing to be,’ he retorted, unperturbed. ‘It’s what *you* need, anyway. Ballast. Roots. An anchor.’

Again, I made a grimace at him. It was virtually impossible to quarrel with Val. He refused to quarrel. Try as I pleased, I couldn’t strike sparks off him. He must be frightfully thick-skinned. No gibes seemed to penetrate his hide.

He swung the big green car into the gravel car-park in front of the Grand Hotel. For a moment, I was afraid he was going to hit one of the cars already parked there, but he missed it by a couple of inches. That again was

characteristic of him. He had a reputation for recklessness and extravagance, but somehow he always avoided disaster.

I glanced around the packed car-park nervously. The Grand Hotel was a popular haunt of the town's élite and it also attracted wealthy tourists. It was usually crowded at the weekend, and this was Saturday morning.

'Why here, Val?' I protested. 'Horribly expensive and conspicuous.'

'Good for the morale,' he assured me. 'Who cares how expensive it is? You'll be the loveliest girl in the table d'hôte room . . . and luncheon will be above reproach '

He took my arm and piloted me firmly up the steps.

CHAPTER VII

For words divide and rend.

A. C. SWINBURNE

'Replete?' Val inquired solicitously.

'And how! What is this stuff?' I twirled the balloon glass carelessly by its stem. The aroma of its contents was as delectable as its flavour. It made me feel good. It also made me feel cherished and expensive.

'My special prescription,' he answered, grinning across the table at me. 'Good medicine?'

'The best.' I puckered my forehead. 'You know, in a queer kind of way, you are clever, Val.'

'Have you noticed it at last?'

'Or, perhaps, I mean perceptive. When you choose to exert yourself, you have a nice knack of doing the right thing at the right time. If anyone had told me beforehand that a luncheon at the Grand would make a new woman of me, I wouldn't have believed it. Yet, honestly, I do feel heaps better.'

I was half ashamed of the admission. It seemed all wrong that the cloud of anxiety and suspense which hung over me should have been dispelled by a luxurious meal in luxurious surroundings. Honesty compelled me to admit it, though, out of fairness to Val.

'Thanks, Baby!' he said, and there was an amused, indulgent tenderness in his eyes as he gazed at me. '"Dare to be true; nothing can need a lie." You subscribe to that theory, don't you?'

'Not always. There are times when one either has to tell a lie or else let someone in for trouble.'

'I'll pass that. You wouldn't lie to keep yourself in the clear.'

It was a statement, not a question.

I said feelingly: 'I wish Matron had as much confidence in me.'

'Perhaps she had, but it's been deliberately undermined. It's too bad that we shan't be seeing you in the May Queen's splendour.'

'Yes. It is rather a blow.'

The pain came back at his reminder, only it was a dull ache now, instead of a fierce, stabbing agony. The very matter-of factness of his tone reduced my disappointment to 'just one of those things'. It had been this same treatment which he had applied to my anguish of fear for Patrick.

'The great minimizer, who reduces all mountains to mole-hills. That's you, Val!' I said with grudging respect. 'How do you do it?'

'A sense of proportion helps,' he said mildly. 'But . . . don't think I'm minimizing the damage to your never very robust self confidence. I intend, in due course, to send in a heavy account for that.'

'Send it in—to whom?'

'That I shall make it my business to discover. Someone was behind last night's show. Someone must foot the bill for it.'

'It looks as if Patrick will. Oh, let's get back! There may be fresh news of him,' I said restively. 'It's dreadful of us to be enjoying ourselves here, while he's helpless and in pain.'

'Dreadful? I think it speaks well for us that we can. It proves that *au fond* our consciences are crystal clear.'

'Does it? Your conscience couldn't be involved, anyway.'

'Sure? I could have forged those notes and bribed someone to deliver them. I've been within comparatively easy reach of St. Chad's for several days.'

'Don't!' Uneasiness stirred in me. 'Why? Why suggest that you could have been capable of such a malicious trick?'

He was beckoning to our waiter. He ignored my protest. He paid our bill and added a handsome tip.

It was a refreshing change to have a date with a man who didn't have to count every shilling. I often felt embarrassed when I was taken out by impecunious students, although I knew they were mean from necessity rather than choice.

Val, of course, had always been lavish. As though he exuded lavishness, waiters invariably treated him as a Somebody. He never had to wait for a table or for service. He was never told that the dishes he had selected were 'off'. He was never the target for that freezing disdain with which an experienced waiter could wither an unwelcome guest.

Val put his hand under my elbow and piloted me out of the table d'hôte room. His touch was warm and familiar . . . yet was he really familiar to me? Wasn't I becoming conscious of some entirely new and disturbing facets of him?

Why had he admitted that he could have forged those two notes? Why had he thrust such a horrid possibility into my mind? To disarm me? To forestall any suspicions on my part?

'Oh, no!' I said desperately, as we emerged on to the steps. 'Not you, Val. You couldn't hate us that much. Patrick's your own, your only brother. And I . . . why should you want to wreck me?'

'I was merely warning you to check up on all possibilities.'

'There aren't any. That's what's so bewildering. The trick—if it was a trick—was both ridiculously elaborate and pointless. No one could have foreseen that Patrick would escape by the roof. Besides, Night Sister says the door wasn't locked,' I said dully. 'If Patrick did write to me, why did he deny it at first? And who closed the door so that it jammed? He left it open.'

'The whole story is full of inconsistencies . . . your version and his. Take care, Evelyn! Don't reason that Joan

or Betty or Muriel—whoever your girl friends are—couldn't have been capable of such a scheme,' Val said, with unusual gravity. 'Given the incentive, almost anyone is capable of almost any low-down trick.'

'What a horrid ideal'

'I said "almost anyone".'

'I'm glad you allow for some exceptions.'

'Naturally, you're one. Perhaps, the only one I know.'

'Oh, no, Val! Don't be such a cynic. Patrick couldn't play a low-down trick. Nor could my best friend, Rosemary Harker. Nor Ursula, of course.'

'If you take my advice, you won't trust anyone. Someone has it in for you.'

'For me? Patrick thought it was for him.'

'Patrick wasn't due to be crowned Queen o' the May, was he?'

'That? Oh, that's nonsense! No one would care enough about being Queen of the May, to try to get me disqualified.'

'You would be surprised, my sweet innocent, how passionately people can care about the oddest things. Just watch your step! That's all I ask.'

'Even with you?' I flashed.

'Yes. With everyone. That you had to ask such a question proves how guileless and lacking in perception you are,' he said calmly. 'If you knew anything about me at all, you would know that I would cheerfully sacrifice a whole hand for your fair sake, if necessary.'

'It's easy to say that. And your hands aren't valuable in the way that Patrick's are.'

'Thanks! They can hold you quite as tightly and more comfortably than his ever will. Remember that!' He gave me a long, thoughtful glance and I noticed once again that his eyes were much more nearly green than grey. Cat's eyes, I reflected uneasily. 'Why do you get a kick out of disparaging me? It's rather foolish to disparage one's own possessions. Why not try looking on the bright side

instead? Or looking for the silver lining? Or counting your blessings?’

‘You are ridiculous . . . you and your clichés.’

‘At least, I can offer you a nice selection. And I can make you smile. You’ve no idea how distractingly kissable your mouth is when you smile.’

‘Oh, stop it! Behave,’ I said as severely as I could.

It was no use. I couldn’t be angry with Val. His good humour defeated me at every turn. Perhaps it was true, as Ursula had observed, that everyone loved a clown.

Val, of course, clowned deliberately. He wasn’t really a fool. He just liked to play the jester. That had always been his rôle at home. Perhaps it was his reaction from Patrick’s purposefulness. It made him a nice, easy person to be with, anyway. He compelled one to smile, and so to relax.

He took the longest possible route back to St. Chad’s, and I didn’t comment on it. Now that it came to the point, I dreaded parting from him and being left to my own devices in the hostel. How should I endure the hours between me and nightfall, when I might presumably expect to sleep? How should I endure tomorrow? Or any of the ‘tomorrows’, until there was definitely reassuring news of Patrick? I thought forlornly. If I went home on Monday it wouldn’t be any easier. It would be harder, because I should be out of reach of him.

‘Some of these trees need attention,’ Val said suddenly, when we were driving slowly up from the main entrance. The drive was bordered by majestic-looking beeches, just beginning to burst into leaf. Beyond them stretched smooth, age-old lawns which were carefully tended but never put to any practical purpose.

I glanced idly at the trees. Then, I clutched at Val’s arm. Pacing slowly beneath the trees, came Ursula. She raised one hand imperatively, and I felt the blood ebbing from my cheeks.

‘Ursula . . .’ I faltered. ‘She’s waiting for us. Perhaps . . . perhaps he’s worse . . .’

'Highly improbable.'

'She ought to be resting. She was on night duty last night.'

'Was she? That's interesting!'

'Interesting? Why? She volunteered for duty because a friend of hers had gone sick. She's always doing good turns like that.'

Val didn't answer. He drew up close to the grass, and Ursula came over to us, looking pale and anxious, but as lovely as ever, with the sunshine illuminating her spun gold hair.

'Oh, Val, what a wonderful surprise! I didn't know you were anywhere near us,' she exclaimed, her blue eyes widening. 'I couldn't guess who had taken Eve out, and I was worried sick about her. I think you might have left a message for me.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you. I thought you were asleep,' I said penitently, as we both got out to join her.

'Asleep? How could I sleep with so much on my mind?' She turned appealingly to Val. 'Have you managed to cheer her up a little? You know how sensitive she is. It's ghastly for her to feel that she has two, and possibly three deaths on her hands.'

'Deaths?' I echoed dazedly. 'Whose deaths?'

'Of course that poor old man might have had another heart attack, anyway, but little Mrs. Davis wouldn't have lost her first baby, if you hadn't rung the bells just at the critical moment. She flew into a wild panic. She connected the din with the air raids, during the war. She was screaming and fighting to get out of bed and into the air-raid shelter. She was delirious with terror,' Ursula said regretfully.

'Oh, dear! How ghastly!' I said miserably.

'It was a pity. It was such a sweet little baby, too. A girl baby, with the prettiest fair curls. . . .'

'Be quiet!' Val said peremptorily. 'Evelyn has enough to haunt her already.'

'She won't be haunted by that poor little dead baby. She didn't see it. I did. Everyone was in such a flap that I had to handle it. Mrs. Davis wouldn't believe that it was dead until she'd been shown it. Then, of course, she collapsed in hysterics. She's really ill today.'

'You heard what I said. Be quiet!' Val interposed again.

'Val dear, it's better to talk of a tragedy than to brood over it. And, after all, Eve didn't know Mrs. Davis,' Ursula said gently. 'She can't help worrying about little Jimmy, but he may recover.'

'Jimmy?' I echoed apprehensively. 'That freckle-faced small boy whom Patrick operated upon last Wednesday? I thought he was going on well.'

'So he was, until last night. Then, he had violent hæmorrhage. Sister was trying frantically to contact Patrick, but he didn't answer the telephone and no one knew where to find him. She had to send for Mr. Manuden and, of course, it took ages for him to get to us.'

I couldn't speak. I felt as though a hard, cold core of misery was growing and growing inside me, paralysing me.

'I don't believe the old saying that deaths come in threes. I don't see why Jimmy shouldn't survive,' Ursula went on evenly. 'You must try not to distress yourself, Eve darling. You couldn't have foreseen that anyone would die through your escapade. You didn't really kill that poor little baby, any more than Patrick did. He was just as much to blame . . .'

'Evelyn didn't kill anyone. What sickening rubbish is that?' Val demanded almost savagely. 'Life and death are in the hands of the Almighty. That's what Evelyn's father would tell you. You nurses and doctors, however brilliant you may be, can neither create life nor destroy it. You're merely instruments.'

I stared at him, bewildered. That hadn't sounded in the least like reckless, happy-go-lucky Val. It might, indeed, have been my father who had spoken.

'But . . . that's just what I've been saying, Val dear. I've been begging Eve not to blame herself,' Ursula said

patiently. 'Even if she did ask Patrick to meet her in the belfry, he needn't have gone. It was very wrong of him to go, when he was on call.'

'You imagine that Eve asked Patrick to meet her at midnight in the belfry?' Val said abruptly. 'What about his story that he wrote to her, suggesting the meeting?'

'My dear, it's painfully obvious that Patrick is being noble and chivalrous and trying to shield her,' Ursula said with conviction. 'Is it likely that he would have suggested anything so crazy and irresponsible? When the first furore has died down, everyone will realize that he was merely responding to Eve's S.O.S.'

'Could be. People are fools enough to swallow anything . . . provided it's served up appetisingly enough,' Val retorted, with a kind of bite in his tone which I had never heard there before. 'That settles it. I'm not leaving Evelyn here to be thrown to the wolves. I'll take her home tomorrow.'

'Matron said Monday,' I reminded him faintly. 'Besides . . .'

'Don't argue! I'll see Matron and tell her that I'll call for you at nine o'clock tomorrow morning,' he said firmly. 'In the meantime, watch your step. So long!'

He swung himself back into the driver's seat. He shut the door with a sharp click. I looked after him half wistfully, half in exasperation.

I didn't want him to make plans for me, as if I were a child. Yet his solid, matter-of-fact presence was a comfort. He was someone to hold on to, in this cloudy, nightmare world which was so hurtful and terrifying."

Then, Ursula put an arm round me and the nightmares receded. I leaned against her arm thankfully.

'Poor darling! Come and lie down,' she said soothingly. 'You must be exhausted. What possessed you to go out with Val?'

'I—I don't know. It was his idea.'

'So like him. He's hopelessly irresponsible and incon-

siderate. He might have stopped to think that people would talk.'

'Talk?'

'If you go gadding about with Patrick's brother, while Patrick is in hospital. It looks callous, to put it mildly. People will imagine that you're a shameless flirt,' she said reproachfully. 'Not that Val would care, of course. He would jump at the chance of spoiling anything for Patrick.'

'Would he? How do you know?'

'Darling, has it never dawned on you that Val is consumed by jealousy of Patrick?'

'I—I haven't thought about it. I've always taken Val for granted. I don't really know much about him.'

'Oh, he's not a bad sort at heart! He's just lazy and irresponsible and jealous of Patrick, because Patrick is all the things he isn't,' Ursula said tolerantly. 'Val's all right at a distance. One can't rely on him, as one can on Patrick.'

'I suppose not.'

'Poor darling Patrick! He must be suffering agonies now . . . and there's not a thing we can do to relieve his mind,' Ursula said compassionately. 'At least, there's nothing I can do.'

'What can I do?'

'You could clear his name, to some extent. You could admit that you had lured him to that disastrous rendezvous. As it is now, the gossips are hinting that he lured you there . . . with seduction in view.'

'But . . . I didn't. I didn't write to him.'

There was a slight, tense silence.

Then, Ursula said tentatively: 'If you're determined to stick to that story, it's no use my protesting. Only I thought you were fond of Patrick. Don't you realize that such a sordid episode will tarnish his reputation for ever?'

'Yes,' I said shakily. 'Yes. I realize it.'

'Then, how can you shield your own good name at the expense of his?'

'It isn't like that. I didn't write to him. Don't you

believe me, Ursula?' I drew away from her. I stared at her challengingly.

'Darling, how can I answer that? I want to believe you . . . but I know Patrick.'

'Better than you know me?'

She shook her shining head.

'It's because I know you, Evie. I know how impulsive you are, how thoughtless, and how childishy obstinate. I know how often you rush into some crazy escapade and how bitterly you regret it afterwards. I know that you hate to own yourself at fault . . . hate people to criticize you.'

'Is that the kind of person I am? You've left out something. You've forgotten to add that I'm an accomplished liar.'

'Oh, no! Not that. You lie most childishly and transparently. You say: "I didn't! I didn't!" and expect it to sound convincing,' she said gravely.

It was like beating with my bare hands against a stone wall. I felt chilled and bruised and defeated. What was the use of repeating: 'I didn't!' if no one would believe me? No one, that was, except Val, and he scarcely counted. He was an outsider, not part of my life here.

'If only I could see Patrick,' I said miserably.

'Shall I try to coax him into seeing you?'

'Oh, Ursula, would you? Could you?'

'Just possibly, I could,' she answered thoughtfully. 'But . . . you would have to promise not to make things worse for him; not to play on his chivalry.'

'As if I would!'

Anger smouldered in me. Didn't she know that I would die before I hurt Patrick? What right had she to assume that protective air towards him?

I remembered the anguish in her tone when she had knelt beside him. Again, I wondered uneasily if she was in love with him. Surely not? If there had ever been anything like that in the wind, was it likely that Patrick would have turned to me?

'I'll try, but it will have to be tomorrow. I daren't go

wandering around Casualty Ward now. I'm supposed to be resting.'

'Tomorrow? I'm going home tomorrow. Val's taking me.'

'He can wait till you've seen Patrick, can't he?' she said sharply. 'If not, you could easily go home by train on Monday. That was what Matron suggested. She may not agree to your rushing off with Val tomorrow. It does look a little odd.'

'Odd? Why?'

'Don't be so naïve!'

I swallowed back the indignant retort which sprang to my lips. What had happened to me that I should be on the verge of quarrelling with Ursula . . . and over Val, of all people? Somehow, everything I did or said seemed to be off-key today. The usual harmony between Ursula and me had been turned into discord. Was that my fault—or Val's? I began to wish that he hadn't come here, or that I hadn't let him make plans for me.

CHAPTER VIII

My heart beats loud and fast.

P. B. SHELLEY

His hair looked very dark against the pillow. His face was unfamiliarly pale. I stood on the threshold, hesitating. I longed to run to him, but I was afraid of a rebuff. I was pitifully vulnerable to Patrick and his moods. I seemed to have no pride at all where he was concerned. Perhaps that was the result of too long a love; too long a dominance. It was nearly five years ago that he had first taken possession of me . . . mentally and emotionally, if not physically. Five years was a large slice out of my life.

'Patrick,' I said tentatively.

He turned his head. He gazed at me bleakly.

'Well?'

I was at a loss for words. I couldn't ask if he was better. That would sound maddeningly trite and casual. I had come to him for reassurance. He must know that. Why wouldn't he help me? Why must he stare at me with that chilling, steely glint in his grey eyes?

'Are you still angry with me?' I faltered childishly.

'Angry?' His well-cut lips twisted. 'That's hardly the appropriate word.'

'Resentful, then. Bitter . . .'

'You couldn't have foreseen this,' he said wearily, touching his right arm lightly with two fingers of his left hand. 'Recriminations would be pointless . . . and unfair.'

'You must know that I'm terribly sorry. Oh, dear! How inadequate that sounds! What can I say? What can I do?'

'Nothing. That was why I didn't want you to come. Why harrow yourself or embarrass me?' He moved his

head restively. 'We've always been honest with each other. Must I gloss over the truth now, to soothe you? Must I pretend that this is nothing?'

Again, he fingered his injured arm.

He wasn't accusing me outright, but the inference was there, staring at me. I gripped my hands tightly together. I tried to marshal my defences.

'You think I did write that note, don't you?' I said in a low, half strangled voice. I felt as if his lean fingers were tightening on my throat. I could scarcely breathe. 'You think I've denied it out of panic.'

'And that isn't so?' His voice was still weary. It sounded almost bored. 'What does it matter, either way?'

'What does it matter?' I was choking. I was breathing in short, painful gasps. I hadn't known that emotion could seize one by the throat like this. 'Of course it matters . . . tremendously. If you don't believe me . . . if you can't take my word against any evidence . . . you obviously don't love me.'

'Love?' His thin, finely cut lips quirked upwards. 'I thought we should come to that, sooner or later. The eternal feminine plea and plaint: "If you love me . . ." or "You don't love me." Heavens above, what has love to do with this? Try and use a little logic.'

I was silenced and confused by his sudden attack. I fumbled vainly for words. He might talk of logic, but had logic ever any place in love? It was love . . . our love . . . which concerned me, if not him. Terrible as this predicament might prove to be, I believed that we could weather it together. If Patrick turned against me in anger and distrust, if he deliberately tore the delicate fabric of our mutual understanding, we should both be lost.

'It isn't only for my sake. Naturally, love is all-important to a woman, but it's important to a man, too. When a man is up against it, he needs a woman beside him. Two can be braver than one alone . . . and women have more faith.'

'Women? You're little more than a kid. You don't in

the least realize what you've done to me, or you couldn't stand there so calmly, arguing about love,' he said irritably. 'If you must talk to me, come in and shut that door. Wards—even private wards—have sharp ears.'

I obeyed mechanically. It was a very small room. There was barely space for a hard, upright chair between the bed and the white wall. I squeezed myself into the chair, uneasily aware of my shaking knees and clammy hands. Why must his profile look so chiselled and stony—as if it belonged to an effigy on a tomb? Why was there no hint of warmth in his unyieldingly steely glance? What could I say to reach him and bring him back to me?

His anger—no, he had said it wasn't anger, hadn't he? His sense of injury, then, or whatever it was which was lowering a steel curtain between us, was breaking my heart. I had never quite believed in that stock phrase. Now, I knew that it was much more than an old-fashioned cliché. My heart was too full of confused emotions and dull, voiceless pain. It was being strained to bursting point. It couldn't hold—couldn't take—any more. Something would have to give . . .

'It hurts,' I said weakly and stupidly. 'I didn't know a heart could hurt, except for physical reasons. I didn't know that just loving anyone could hurt like this.'

'Oh, my dear, silly, over-emotional Lyn!' He groaned, half humorously, half in self-mockery. 'How exasperating can you be? Of course, I love you. That's the spell, the enchantment, and the curse of a lovely, feckless, feminine creature like you. Men will always adore you and fight over you, even when they know that you're luring them on to the rocks.'

I blinked. I gaped at him. That admission seemed to me wildly extravagant and incredible. I was no enchantress. I was merely the girl who—for my sins—loved him.

'Come here!' he said urgently, reaching for me with his left hand. 'Come close so that I can kiss you.'

'You can't want to kiss me, if you really believe that I wrote that note—and denied it.'

'Can't I? Is that all you know about a man and what he wants? You're lovely and desirable—and *mine*! What else matters?' he retorted mockingly. 'Come here.'

I bent over him. His lips fastened on mine with something more than their usual ardour. For once, there was no swift, rapturous response in me. I felt bruised and humiliated, as though he was trying to savage me. There was no tenderness in him now. He was despising both of us.

'What's the matter?' he demanded, as I drew away from him, panting. 'Wasn't that what you were pleading for just now?'

'No. No, it wasn't.'

I put my handkerchief to my lips. I was dully surprised that it came away unstained. I had been certain that my lips were bleeding.

'Why not? If your motive is to make it up to me, don't you want to start now?'

'Make it up to you?'

'For shattering my one possession that's beyond price—my right hand and its skill. Aren't you offering me yourself by way of compensation?'

'Oh, Patrick, don't! It isn't like that. I'm yours already.'

'Not entirely.'

This was beyond endurance. Somewhere, from out of my pain and humiliation, Val loomed up and asked crisply what I was feeling guilty about—I who was the innocent victim? Val believed that. Why couldn't Patrick?

'There's my reputation, too,' Patrick went on tauntingly. 'That's shattered just as irrevocably. Not such a serious loss, of course, but not wholly negligible.'

I shrank beneath his bitter irony. I had a dreadful, unnerving feeling that it was he who was shattering everything; he, not the person who had played that damnable trick on us. Perhaps it had been a mistake to insist on seeing him before I went home. This painful exchange

could never be wholly forgiven or forgotten. He was stabbing me too deeply.

'How can I make it up to you for something I didn't do?' I said desperately.

His left hand reached for the dressing-gown hanging beside him. He managed, awkwardly, to draw a sheet of plain white paper from the pocket. I would have taken it from him, but he waved my hand aside.

'I'm keeping this . . . even if my chivalry refuses to let me use it,' he said coldly.

The blood rushed up to my temples.

'Are you imagining that I—I would destroy it?' I faltered incredulously.

'If it were destroyed, it would be simply your word against mine.'

'Oh, Patrick . . . Patrick . . . ' I was choking again. 'Has it come to that?'

'Look!' he said inexorably. 'Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it . . . if you've never seen it before.'

I stared in horrified fascination at the only too familiar handwriting. The wording was almost a duplicate of that in the note I had received. The handwriting—I could have sworn it was my own. The signature was uncannily mine, even to the phrasing: 'Now and for ever, Your Lyn.'

Who could have known that that was how I invariably signed my letters to Patrick? To Patrick . . . and to nobody else? The blood was throbbing in my temples furiously. Who? Who could have seen a letter from me to Patrick? I had rarely had occasion to write to him since his student days. Who could have got hold of a note from me and copied it? Surely, he hadn't kept those old letters, written when he had been at St. Chad's and I still at Watersfall? Patrick wasn't the kind of man who cluttered up his rooms with old—or new—souvenirs. He liked to 'travel light' in every sense of the phrase.

'Well?' he said, his black brows lifting sardonically. 'If I had chosen to publish this . . . '

'In the time-honoured answer—"Publish and be

damned"—if it's likely to clear you,' I said hotly. 'Perhaps it will. If it's a good enough forgery to deceive you, it should deceive the rest of St. Chad's.'

'It's a forgery, is it? Thanks for telling me! I wouldn't have guessed it.'

'So I perceive.' I pressed my hands to my burning temples. I had a dreadful fear that I was about to stamp on what he had already broken, instead of trying to collect up the fragments. Something might be saved and stuck together again, with time and patience. It seemed a pity that my patience was fraying through, like an over-strained rope against a sharp edge of rock. I could see and feel the strands parting, one by one. Yet I couldn't make a move to relieve the strain on them.

I said dully: 'God . . . Oh, God . . .' It wasn't swearing. It was a prayer, but a prayer with nothing behind it. I knew it was up to me to save us both from breaking point. I knew I couldn't do it. Patrick, like Ursula, was demanding too much of me. I couldn't say what they were expecting me to say.

'It's no use,' I said despairingly, to his stony profile. 'You can show that note to everyone in St. Chad's. I won't deny writing it . . . but neither will I admit it.'

'I don't want to hurt you but, as Ursula pointed out, my future should be more valuable to the community as a whole than yours could ever be,' he said dispassionately. 'My first impulse was naturally to shield you. Ursula says that was a mistake.'

'Ursula, as usual, is right. Right about everything but this note . . .'

I stared at those few lines as if I would compel them to yield up the secret of their penmanship. There must be a flaw in them somewhere; a betraying flaw. Didn't even murderers proverbially make one slip?

'Then . . .' Patrick paused expectantly.

'Oh, leave it to Ursula! She'll get your reputation polished up again, if anyone can. Hers shines like twenty-two carat gold,' I said with involuntary bitterness. 'Why

on earth didn't you fall in love with her, instead of with me?'

'Because, with all her shining virtues, Ursula is ice-cold. You're warm and sweet and everything a man yearns to hold in his arms. Kiss me again!' he said urgently. 'Come close to me. Let me hold you tight . . . and forget that anything else matters. Let me feel the smoothness of your skin and the blood throbbing in your veins.'

'Patrick . . .'

He gave me a wintry smile.

'Didn't you know I was that way about you? The tragedy of it was that I should have tried to repress it. If I hadn't, this wouldn't have happened. Instead of being an irresistible lure, you might have been my wife, waiting for me at the end of every day's work.'

'Oh! But . . .'

'I wouldn't admit that I needed any such relaxation. I saw myself as austerity personified. Dedicated . . . like a priest . . .' Again that wintry smile. 'Unhappily, I'm no priest. When I got your note, I fell to thinking of you . . . and it was fatal.'

'The woman tempted me . . . That's what you're saying. The old excuse. Only, not true. Not of me . . .'

'You talk too much. Words can't compensate me for this disaster. Come closer . . .'

I forced myself to comply. The pressure of his lips on mine felt again as if he were slaking his thirst at them. His left hand caressed me feverishly. His fingers were cool against my skin, but they had a hunger and a possession in their touch which made me go hot all over. He seemed suddenly to have become a stranger; a predatory, acquisitive stranger.

I never knew afterwards quite how far he would have gone. I was saved by the arrival of Harriet Greenways with lunch for Patrick. She looked at me censoriously, but at least she hadn't caught me in Patrick's passionate embrace. I had freed myself just in time.

With a bustling competence, she helped him to sit up,

rearranged his pillows, erected a bed-table, and served him with roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, boiled potatoes, and tough-looking 'greens'. She cut everything up for him so that he could eat with a fork alone. I didn't, to my great surprise, resent her ministrations. I didn't, I discovered, yearn to 'baby' Patrick. My emotions towards him weren't at all maternal.

'I must go now,' I said awkwardly, for Harriet's benefit.

'Yes. Thanks for coming! I hope you'll have a good holiday. Remember me to your father,' Patrick responded formally.

Did he really think it worth while to keep up a pretence of merely casual friendship? Why should it damage his reputation to announce our engagement? Because I was only one of the nurses, and not yet even fully qualified? Or because I wasn't anyone in particular, from a social point of view? Perhaps he was still smarting beneath the indignity of having been shut into the belfry. Perhaps he feared ridicule as well as gossip.

I hadn't really accomplished anything by seeing him. I might have gone with Val, when he had called for me, earlier this morning, I thought disconsolately, for all the good I had done by refusing. Val hadn't liked my insistence that I must see Patrick before I left for home. I wasn't sure whether he would wait for me or not. I had begged Rosemary to keep him amused, but it seemed unlikely that she would have succeeded.

Rosemary was the only one of my close friends who had a free Sunday, or I shouldn't have dreamt of asking her. She was allergic to men, and I certainly couldn't expect her to approve of such an irresponsible, irrepressible specimen as Val.

The big, showy-looking green car had vanished when I reached the hostel. I tried to stifle a pang. Why should I have expected Val to hang about until I was ready to start? Why should I feel forlorn and deserted because he had gone without me? Just how inconsistent could I be?

CHAPTER IX

*You speak like a green girl
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.*

W. SHAKESPEARE

I didn't know how to face lunch in the vast dining-hall; how to face the inevitable catechism. I turned down the drive, walking on the young grass beneath the beech trees.

Inevitably, I saw, in a vivid flash, Ursula's graceful figure pacing up and down here, waiting for me, yesterday afternoon. I heard again her gentle, musical voice. I wanted to press my hands over my ears and over my eyes. I was haunted by what she had told me and by the pictures she had made me see.

Wasn't it enough that I had been nightmare-ridden all night? Must I be haunted by day as well? Was there no escape? Ursula thought it was cowardly of me to try to elude the responsibility of those two deaths . . . but how could I shoulder it? I hadn't her courage, and I was weighed down already by what had befallen Patrick.

One could bear just so much and no more. My breaking point was obviously reached more easily than hers. Couldn't she understand that? Couldn't Patrick?

I heard the sound of a car turning into the drive. It was like an answer to a prayer which I had barely formulated. I knew, before I saw it, that the car was Val's. I knew it with such certainty that I should have been astonished had it been any other. It had to be Val's.

Suddenly, I didn't care that it was too vivid, too big, and too showy altogether. I didn't care that Val was positively coarse and plain compared with Patrick. I didn't care that he was flippant and irresponsible, extravagant and of commoner clay. He could be all that Ursula

pointed out so disparagingly, and worse. He was still Val . . . solid and warm and comforting. In him and with him lay my only refuge.

The car pulled up on the gravel in front of the hostel. I saw in amazement that Rosemary was occupying the front seat beside Val. Even more amazing, she was laughing . . . and so was he. They looked as if they were entirely at ease together.

He got out first and opened the other door for her. She scrambled out, almost into his arms. He put one hand on her shoulder and stared down at her, as if challenging her, or reminding her of something.

Rosemary was a grand person, but no one could call her ornamental. This morning, she was wearing jeans in navy-blue denim, with a bright orange sweater. Both the sweater and the jeans fitted her stocky figure too tightly to be at all becoming. Shabby canvas shoes and no stockings completed the outfit.

Where had Val taken her? Out for a drink? Not to the Grand Hotel, surely? In that get-up, a beach kiosk was the only appropriate place for refreshments for Rosemary . . . but I couldn't picture Val's offering her a glass of bright yellow lemonade or a stick of bright pink rock.

I couldn't think why he had considered it necessary to take her anywhere. I emerged from the shadow of the trees and went charging across the gravel to them.

'Hello!' Val said casually.

He was lighting a cigarette for Rosemary when I reached them. He went on cupping his lighter in his hands while she bent towards him. Neither of them seemed surprised or embarrassed or uneasy at my descent upon them. There was no reason why they should, I told myself irritably. It was just odd, that was all; odd that Rosemary should have got on so well with the very type of man she affected to despise.

'Hello!' I said breathlessly. 'Where have you been?'

'Don't sound so accusing!' Rosemary looked up and

chuckled. 'We've been to the Trout and Fly for beer and sandwiches. Jolly good, too.'

'Oh!' I said weakly.

There was nothing else I could say. The Trout and Fly was a much patronized and prosperous inn, with a long frontage to the river. I had been taken there on summer evenings . . . but not often. It didn't offer any cheap hospitality.

'You've had lunch, then,' I said shortly.

'Just a snack. I was starving,' Rosemary said frankly. 'So was Val, after his early morning start.'

'Val'? Was she calling him 'Val' already? I was divided between amusement and exasperation. She turned to him again.

'So long!'

'So long! I'll be seeing you,' he responded with what I thought quite unnecessary emphasis.

'It's scarcely likely that you'll see Rosemary again,' I said tartly, as she marched off to the dining-hall.

'Could be,' he said meditatively. 'You've a good friend there. I bet you didn't choose her. She must have picked on you.'

'What do you mean? We were room-mates for our first year.'

'You're such a rotten picker, Baby. A dead mark for anyone who's looking for a sucker.'

'Well, thanks. Thanks a lot!' I flared. 'At least, I appear to have picked the right girl to amuse you. It sounds as if you've found a twin soul in Rosemary.'

'Shall we call it a kindred spirit? More appropriate and less exclusive,' he answered amicably. 'I shall certainly make a point of cultivating her.'

'How? When?'

'When I interviewed Matron yesterday, I told her that a number of the beech trees needed expert attention. She promised to mention it to the Committee. Rosemary's father is a prominent member of the Committee. Which

adds up to a new commission for yours truly. Wheels within wheels, Baby.'

'Oh, you!' I could have boxed his ears. 'Were you making up to Rosemary just in the hope of a job here? I call that despicable.'

'Why? Wouldn't you like to have me on the spot? She would. She's as keen as mustard on the preservation of those magnificent old beeches,' he said teasingly.

'It's news to me that Rosemary knows a beech from an elm.'

'Now, now! That's being pussyish. Not your form at all.'

He grinned at me and I was obliged to smile back at him. Ursula was right. One couldn't be hard on a clown.

'Here's something to bring out the latent feline in your friends and enemies,' he went on cheerfully, diving into his pockets. 'Say it with sapphires . . .'

'Val! Val, are you crazy?'

I was both dazzled and disarmed by what lay in the palm of his hand. It was a really lovely sapphire; a large, darkly blue sapphire, set in a circle of diamonds on a platinum ring.

'Nice?' he asked, quirking his thick, pale tawny brows at me.

'It's—it's gorgeous.'

I wanted to say that it was too showy, like his car, but the words wouldn't come. The ring might be ostentatious, but those stones weren't imitations. They were the genuine article.

'Try it on, Baby! It's all yours.'

'No. Don't talk nonsense! You know how things are—between Patrick and me.'

'Precisely. This represents a face-saver for you, and an "out" for Patrick. If you're engaged to me, that will automatically squash any gossip about you and him.'

'Oh! Do you think so?'

'It's obvious. Why should a girl want to get herself seduced in a grimy tower at midnight, when she has already

landed a man who can buy her a ring like this?' he demanded. 'Use your wits, my darling!'

'Now, you're being detestable! Who cares what kind of a ring you can afford?'

'To the world at large, money doesn't merely whisper. It shouts. Don't you want to leave Pat free? Do you want to pin him down and trail his precious reputation in the mud?'

'Of course not, but——'

'Then, put that ring on your finger and let's go along to the dining-hall. Matron invited me to lunch here.'

'Oh, did she? You appear to have made quite a hit with Matron.'

He went on smiling down at me, refusing to be side-tracked. Confused and resentful, I thrust the ring on to my engagement finger. It fitted as though it had been made for me. The sapphire glowed up at me darkly. The diamonds sparkled brilliantly. It was a wickedly expensive combination, but I couldn't call it 'vulgar ostentation'. A craftsman must have designed the setting and selected the stones for it. The result was a ring for a duchess, rather than for a would-be glamour-girl.

'You do like to splash your money about, don't you?' I said crossly.

'What else is it for, Baby? In itself, money is singularly dull and ugly, but it can buy some remarkably beautiful things,' he answered calmly. 'It's also useful in creating impressions.'

I could not argue with him. He was tireless and I had no energy left. I wondered dully if he imagined that he was buying me. I couldn't believe that his sole motive was to safeguard Patrick's reputation. Val was patently an opportunist.

And . . . what else? What manner of man was concealed behind his bland smile? 'To smile and smile and be a villain . . .' flashed into my mind. It might well be true. Val didn't give himself away, for all his apparently candid

'cards on the table' air. He was like a conjuror, distracting attention from his 'magic' by clever patter.

A slight shiver ran down my spine as he took my arm and piloted me across the quad. He was rushing me into this before I had time to think about it. Why? Was it a form of bluff? Was he counting on my reluctance to incite more gossip by breaking our 'engagement'? Or was he, as Ursula had suspected, out to stab Patrick in the back?

'This isn't real,' I said desperately. 'Nothing would induce me to marry you. I'd like to put that on record.'

'I'll take my chance of that, when the time comes. Put that on record, too.'

'Isn't a fake engagement rather pointless?'

'Not to the gossips. They'll have a grand time, discussing us. Try to smile and blush appropriately, Baby.'

He opened the heavy oak door for me as he spoke. He needn't have instructed me to blush. I knew my face was scarlet. We were late, and it seemed as if every pair of eyes in the hall was directed at us. Worse still, I had no idea where to take Val. To my usual table? But . . . we student nurses were never permitted to invite friends in for casual meals. When relatives came to visit us, Matron sometimes condescended to invite them to stay for lunch. Then, of course, they sat at her table.

'This way . . .' Val said confidently, waving . . . actually waving . . . across the hall to Matron.

She responded with a regal beckoning. Even redder, if that were possible, I had to let Val march me over to the high table. I felt like a very new girl who had strayed into the staff's sitting-room and couldn't escape. Matron, as frequently happened at the weekend, was entertaining half a dozen distinguished guests. The men looked at me kindly. The women just refrained from raising their brows.

Val, of course, was completely at his ease. He held out my left hand for Matron's inspection and demanded congratulations. He apologized for not having brought an adequate supply of champagne with him. I sank into a

vacant chair and wished it would disappear through a convenient trap-door.

Afterwards, I had only the haziest recollections of that dreadful luncheon. I supposed I must have spoken. I couldn't have remained dumb throughout the meal, but I couldn't remember what I had said or to whom I had addressed myself. I remembered Val's holding forth on trout fishing and the added zest to be derived from tying one's own flies. One of the guests—I learned later that he was an eminent visiting surgeon—was a fellow enthusiast.

Val was undeniably versatile. He also talked of flowering shrubs, and gave an elderly, duchess-like person tips on how and when to take cuttings from them. He finished up by discussing the pros and cons of clipping poodles with a woman who bred them as a hobby.

When at last we were in the process of escaping, I heard the duchess-like person exclaim: 'What a delightful young man! Is he on the staff here? I should so much like to be attended by him.'

'There you are,' I said acidly, in Val's ear. 'You seem to have missed your vocation.'

He laughed as he opened the oak door for me.

'Not cold-blooded enough. I could do the sick visiting and the bedside manner, but I couldn't carve up living people, even for their own good.'

'I don't know. You can be pretty ruthless. Why did you force that ordeal on me?' I demanded.

'For your own protection.'

'Protection? That's an odd word to use.'

'Is it? You've a deadly enemy somewhere in this vicinity . . . and don't forget it.'

'I have? Surely, it was for Patrick that the trap was baited?'

'Could be . . . but you were the bait. What usually happens to bait?'

'Don't!'

Then, we were surrounded by those of my friends who had been lunching in hall. It was almost like a repetition

of that other excitement, when my name had been on everyone's lips. Indeed, the glittering ring on my third finger seemed to be regarded as rather more of an achievement than having been chosen as May Queen. I had to display my ring until my arm ached. I had to answer—or parry—questions as well as good wishes.

Val rescued me in his imperturbably competent fashion by announcing that it was high time we started for home to seek my father's blessing, not forgetting his father's, too.

'Oh, of course! You come from the same home-town, don't you?' Daphne Allen observed, a little superciliously. 'Were you childhood sweethearts? How romantic!'

'Evelyn was the sweetheart everyone wanted, but I bagged her early on,' Val answered easily. 'Anyone who has a knife unsheathed for her will have to stick it into me first.'

'That was a peculiar thing to say,' I rebuked him, when he had extricated us and was heading for his car. 'Daphne looked quite taken aback.'

'Good! Daphne? Friend of yours?'

'No. A hanger-on of Ursula's. I don't like her much. She gives herself airs, and she's a gossip.'

'She's a treacherous little vixen, to judge from that sly, sliding way of eyeing one, and that petulant mouth,' Val retorted bluntly. 'She has it in for you, Baby.' -

'How do you know?'

He shrugged his massive shoulders.

'In the same way I know a tree is rotten at the heart even before I touch it. Where's your luggage?'

'In the porch.'

'Then, let's get cracking before it occurs to any of these females to plant a time-bomb in it.'

I laughed half-heartedly. Then, I saw that his expression was entirely serious; even sombre.

'Good heavens!' I said weakly. 'You're not trying to be funny.'

'No. A time-bomb is unlikely, I admit, but whoever thought out those notes can think out something pretty

lethal. We're up against a remarkably facile and subtle brain.'

There was a warming reassurance about his 'we', but he wasn't really involved. The unknown enemy had no grievance against Val. It was generous of Val to thrust himself forward in the hope of shielding me, but would it work? It depended, presumably, upon whether it was I or Patrick who was the quarry.

Suddenly, I remembered the half envious, half supercilious glint of Daphne Allen's pale, china-blue eyes. She had stared very hard at my ring. I had expected her to ask if it was just costume jewellery from a multiple store. She had looked as if she hoped it was.

'Oh, dear! You're putting all kinds of horrid suspicions in my mind,' I said fretfully, as Val heaved my suitcases into the back of the car.

'How otherwise can I safeguard you? Don't think I enjoy shaking the dew from the petals, but someone else will, more violently, if I don't.' He sprang in beside me. 'All set? I'll have to step on it.'

'Why?'

'I've a date to keep. With your father. I promised to sing at Evensong.'

'In the choir?'

'Also, a solo. "O, rest in the Lord . . ."'

'"Wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire",' I quoted. 'Mine, of course, is Patrick. Don't make any mistake about that, Val! Don't try to grab me away from him, by being kind and considerate to Father, as well as to me.'

'Your father has always been my favourite uncle. You know that.'

'Well, I don't want you to be his favourite nephew. You know that,' I countered.

'Your father isn't as easily influenced as you are.'

'I'm not influenced by a voice, at any rate.'

Val had a nice voice, of course, but one wouldn't have guessed, from his speaking voice, that he also had a fine,

natural tenor. It was just pleasant and well modulated. He had the same kind of control over it as over his well-developed muscles. He never exerted any part of himself unnecessarily. Even his driving had the same air of leisurely imperturbability . . . although the speedometer was flickering between fifty and sixty.

'You make everything seem deceptively smooth and easy,' I thought rebelliously. 'You hold the road just as your car does . . . and one doesn't notice the speed.'

CHAPTER X

*For though the day be never so longe
At last the belles ringeth to evensonge.*

S. HAWES

We reached Watersfall in time to join Father at his belated tea. He never had tea till five-thirty on Sundays. He liked an hour's rest after the afternoon's Sunday School, to freshen him up for Evensong.

He was a thin, fragile-looking man, with prematurely white hair, and high cheek-bones, over which the skin seemed too tightly stretched.

He had been extremely delicate as a child, and everyone regarded him as 'not at all strong', but he was hardly ever ill. Probably, he was wirier than he looked.

He greeted Val and me affectionately, but without surprise. I gathered that both Matron and Val had telephoned to him yesterday. He wasn't, to my relief, unduly perturbed by my suspension, or by the reason for it. It was a pity, but no doubt the mystery would be revealed before long, he said mildly. People couldn't be allowed to play spiteful tricks and get away with them. Val was quite right to insist that the culprit must be exposed.

I didn't know how Val intended to 'insist', but I wasn't disposed to argue. It was bliss to be able to relax in one of the familiar, shabby but comfortable armchairs in Father's disgracefully chaotic study. His hobby was collecting stamps, and everyone in the parish knew it. Those who had foreign correspondents saved the envelopes for him. Consequently, there were always odd saucers strewn around the study, containing pulpy envelopes from which the stamps were being soaked, sheets of blotting paper with stamps spread out on them to dry, open cata-

logues and a confetti of used or unused stamp mounts. The stamp mounts roused Mrs. Catt, our housekeeper, to fury, because they would stick to the soles of her shoes.

A good-humoured but long-drawn-out battle was waged ceaselessly between her and Father over his study. She was determined to clear it up and reduce it to the neat and polished state of the other rooms. He was equally determined to keep her out of the room. After one of her periodical raids, he could never find anything, and certain treasures among his stamps and 'covers' had always vanished, he protested.

Father's deepset, amber-brown eyes were dwelling thoughtfully on my left hand as I poured out tea. I wriggled uneasily.

'This doesn't mean anything . . .'

'It's a provisional engagement,' Val said simultaneously. Then, he grinned at me. 'You needn't make excuses. Uncle Lawrence knows I intend to marry you. He gave me his consent months ago.'

'Father!' I stared at him accusingly. 'You didn't?'

'Why not? I'm much attached to Val,' Father said ingenuously. 'He's intelligent, and, what is rarer, considerate. Reliable, too. He's not likely to change his mind about you, my dear.'

'How nice for me!'

Father smiled abstractedly and eyed Val with a transparent, child-like expectancy. Val felt in his pockets and produced a bulging leather wallet. His big, blunt-fingered hands flipped over the contents expertly. I was watching idly. Suddenly, I tautened. Surely, that was my handwriting, on that yellow envelope? And . . . wasn't that Patrick's neat script, on that folded letter?

Val was discarding envelopes as though he were dealing cards; envelopes with foreign stamps on them.

'That's rather a beauty! A first day cover of the Royal Visit,' he said complacently. 'I spotted it on the mantelpiece in Matron's room at St. Chad's and asked if I could

have it. Apparently, her married sister lives in Australia . . .

'You've a nerve, haven't you?' I said dazedly.

'She also has a nephew in Kenya. She gave me some envelopes from him. Why the surprise? Didn't you call me an opportunist?'

My protest was silenced by Father's naïve pleasure in the Australian cover, and his eagerly expressed belief that one of the Kenya stamps was in a rare perforation. He was about to search for his perforation gauge among the debris on his desk, but I reminded him sharply that it was Sunday evening. If he began to check perforations and consult catalogues, there would be no Evensong.

He looked absurdly like an elderly child, deprived of a treat, and Val gazed at me reproachfully.

'It was time you came home, Baby. Much longer in that sterile atmosphere, and you would have acquired the "cold water deluge" habit for life. One Ursula in the family is ample.'

'Ursula doesn't throw cold water.'

'No. She just pulls the string and releases the shower-bath.'

'Oh, well . . .'

I had a feeling that he was purposely side-tracking me. As he handed the sheaf of envelopes to Father and put the remainder back in his wallet, I noticed that yellow envelope again.

'Isn't that my writing?' I asked impulsively.

'Which? Oh, this? Yes. It's your Christmas letter.'

'And you've kept it all this time?'

'What's odd about that? I've a whole collection of your letters locked away in my bureau drawer, tied up with white satin ribbon.'

'Nonsense! I've hardly ever written to you.'

'That's why I've kept your letters. Like your father, I prefer to collect rarities.'

'You've a letter from Patrick there, too,' I said pointedly, as he replaced the wallet in his pocket.

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence. Then, Val stared at me, his eyes a vivid, eerie green.

'Of course. How could I have imitated your writing or his, unless I'd had specimens of both by me?'

For one dreadful, unnerving moment, I took the words at their face value. The study seemed to be rocking and swirling around me.

'That's what you were thinking, wasn't it?' Val said, in a dangerously quiet tone.

I was instantly ashamed; miserably ashamed of myself.

'You told me to suspect everyone,' I mumbled. 'And—and you're jealous of Patrick. You would like to hurt him.'

'My dear child, what a preposterous ideal' Father said rebukingly. 'You're not yourself at all this evening.'

'Myself? How can I be myself, when Patrick's whole career may be in jeopardy and he believes it's my fault?'

That provoked another awkward silence. Val could have broken it, in his easy, soothing fashion, but he didn't. Perhaps, he was too angry with me to want to comfort me. I had given myself away to Father now, whether I had intended to or not. He was gazing at me with a kind of shocked comprehension.

'Patrick . . . yes,' Val said at last. 'I must dash home and relay the latest news of him. See you later, Uncle Lawrence. So long, Evelyn.'

He was out of his chair and out of the room before I could move. I got to my feet in time to hear the front door click to behind him. I sat down again, feeling thwarted and wretched. The clock on the mantelpiece wheezed and whizzed and, on its usual asthmatical sounding note, chimed six o'clock.

'He'll be late for church,' I said into the silence, when the clock had subsided.

'Oh, no! I don't think so. He never is,' Father responded, with an emphasis which puzzled me. 'One can always depend on Val, but don't try his temper too far, my dear.'

'His temper? Val hasn't a temper. He's as stolid and easy-going as—as a suet pudding.'

'Not an apt simile. Suet pudding shouldn't be "stolid", and I've never yet encountered one which was "easy-going". Unless you mean that it went down easily?'

'Oh, don't tease me, Father! I'm all mixed up as it is.'

'Then, don't rush headlong into a worse muddle. Sit back and think what you're doing,' he admonished me. 'If you've some idea of making use of Val, forget it.'

'The engagement was his suggestion. To kill the gossip about Patrick and me . . .'

Haltingly, I explained the situation as I saw it. Father shook his head at me.

'You're old enough to know the dangers of playing with fire. Val has an extremely fiery temper. Admittedly, he has it well under control, but it's inadvisable to provoke him.'

'I haven't provoked him,' I said crossly. 'I didn't ask him to butt in like that. I'm not interested in him or his emotions, anyway . . . and he knows it.'

'Are you coming to Fvensong?'

'Yes. To pray for Patrick,' I answered defiantly.

'Pray for yourself and Val, too. Pray that you'll measure up to him.'

'Father.' I stared at him blankly. 'You're a queer kind of parent, aren't you? Fathers are supposed not to think any man good enough for an only daughter, but you're talking as if I'm not up to Val's standards.'

'You're too young for him, my child. You'll have to grow up fast if you're to avoid hurting him. I hoped he would wait another year or two for you, until you had emerged from the student stage.'

'That sounds insufferably condescending, even from a father to a daughter. I'm not still in the student stage,' I flashed.

'I'm sorry, but isn't this adoration of the brilliant young house-surgeon a trifle naïve?'

'You're being horrid, Father, and grossly unfair. I've always loved Patrick; ever since I can remember.'

'Then, it's time you emerged from your childish dreams and looked at him with clear, unbemused eyes. At yourself, too. Do you really imagine that you would be satisfied to spend the rest of your life toiling up ladders behind a brilliant and ambitious man? If his foot slipped, his whole weight would come on you. Could you hold him up, do you suppose? Could you carry his impedimenta for him uncomplainingly? Could you resign yourself to being always behind him, instead of at his side, with his arm around you?'

I moved uneasily, impressed against my will by his tone; so tender and concerned.

'It wouldn't be like that. Patrick loves me and needs me.'

Involuntarily, I put my hand to my lips. I could still feel the bruising pressure of his. It was as if he had stamped his imprint on me.

Father glanced significantly at the clock and turned to his untidy desk to extricate the notes for his sermon. I began to collect the used tea-things, making an unnecessary clatter. I couldn't bear it when those I loved seemed to detach themselves from me. I wanted Father to take me on his knee and stroke my hair and pet me as he had done in my childish griefs. I was miserable and worried. He must be aware of it. Why was he lecturing me instead of trying to reassure me? Why was he tacitly refusing to share my desperate anxiety about Patrick? Why wasn't he attempting to absolve me from my acute sense of guilt?

Tears were pricking behind my eyeballs. I blinked angrily. If I were to cry, I should confirm Father in his opinion of my childishness. Only, if he loved me, he ought to want to comfort me. He ought to hold his arms open to me . . . as Val's had been held open.

He was taking his old, carefully darned cassock down from the peg behind the door. When he had put it on, he looked more remote from me than ever. The black cloth

emphasized the silky whiteness of his hair and the austerity of his aquiline features.

'You don't care,' I said miserably and stupidly.

He smiled at me; a gently ironical yet compassionate smile.

'My dear little girl, you can't have it both ways. If you're strong enough and brave enough to toil up ladders after Patrick, you mustn't expect someone to dry your tears and bandage you up when you hurt yourself. He may love you, as you believe, but his isn't a cherishing, protective love. He's a surgeon by temperament, not a physician.'

I longed to cry out: 'You're wrong. You don't know Patrick. You're just, for some reason of your own, trying to push me on to Val.'

The words stuck in my throat. It was impossible to doubt Father's integrity or his affection for me. This detachment was his notion of schooling me. It was how he had treated me in my childhood, when he had thought it incumbent upon him to teach me a lesson.

He hadn't rebuked me for that reckless midnight meeting, but neither would he urge me 'not to think about' its consequences. He was treating me as a reasonable adult. That might be stimulating, but it wasn't comforting.

I carried the tea-tray out to Mrs. Catt in the kitchen. The warm, soporific atmosphere of our familiar, old-fashioned kitchen, with its lingering Sunday evening aromas of mint sauce and spice and yellow soap, mixed with scented geranium from the pots on the window-sill and lavender from Mrs. Catt's 'Sunday black', ought to have been soothing and relaxing. Instead of absorbing the peace of it, I had to submit to her close examination of my conspicuous ring and her unexpectedly guarded good wishes.

'Handsome is as handsome does,' she observed banally. Her small, bird-like bright eyes reminded me of a starling's, when about to pounce on a wriggling worm. 'This'll be a blow to some, I'm thinking.'

'Oh?'

'That Mr. Val has a way with him . . . as many a girl has found out before you, my love. There's been talk . . .'

She paused, moistening her lips with her small, pointed tongue. It seemed to flick at me like an adder's, and I realized that I had never really cared for Mrs. Catt. She had been Aunt Beatrice's choice, not mine. Once, she had been Ursula's Nanny. She had looked after the vicarage and Father faithfully before and ever since Aunt Beatrice's marriage, but her fulsome manner had always irritated me. I had sensed that she was secretly resentful of my presence in the house and relieved when I had departed for St. Chad's.

'Talk?' I echoed sharply.

She glanced over her narrow shoulders as if afraid Father might be within earshot. She was a tiny woman; almost dwarfish, but surprisingly tough, with exceptionally strong hands, yellowish, like a chicken's claws.

'They've a new housemaid at "Many Waters",' she said darkly.

'What? I mean, why?'

'You remember Miranda Penelly? Her with the bold airs and long black hair!'

'Yes. Of course I remember Miranda. Why?'

'Your Aunt Beatrice sent her packing in a hurry. No one knows why. Miranda won't talk. There's some that say she caught Mr. Val's eye. I wouldn't put it past her. She always was a hussy.'

'Oh, no! Oh, what nonsense!' I said, incredulous and indignant. '*Val?* Val wouldn't chase a housemaid.'

'He wouldn't have had to chase that Miranda. Do you remember her in Sunday School, trying to catch the boys' eyes?'

'You——' I bit my lip. I had nearly said: 'You're an evil-minded old woman. Even if you were Ursula's nurse, years ago, you needn't presume on it.'

Ursula called her 'Nanny' still, and was angelically patient with her. To me, she was 'Mrs. Catt', part of the

household, like her over plump ginger cat, which lay on the kitchen hearthrug, but only to be tolerated because resident cook-housekeepers, who were content with modest wages, weren't easy to find.

'Take no notice, dearie. Maybe it's just spiteful gossip,' she said, as if realizing she had gone too far. 'It's a pity it couldn't have been Mr. Patrick. He's a gentleman through and through. Never mind! Mr. Val may settle down once he's married.'

I heard the pealing of the church bells.

I said breathlessly: 'I must get ready for church . . .'
and ran from the kitchen.

I fled upstairs to my bedroom. The dear, familiar belongings seemed to reach out in welcome. Some were shabby, some were gay, some were relics of my nursery days and some were recent acquisitions, but they all added up to 'home'. The wide casement windows were open, and the honey-sweet scent of wallflowers poured in through them. It was as soothing as the tinkle and splash of water from the small stream which ran leaping and dancing and falling down the hillside behind the vicarage. Farther down the valley, where it ran through the woods of 'Many Waters', it joined another, bigger stream. The two cascaded into a deep and beautiful lake, which was fed also by springs. That was why the Elbures' house, which overlooked the lake, was called 'Many Waters'. At the other end of the lake were the falls, which gave the village its name.

In the winter, when the trees were bare, I could see the shimmer of the lake from my bedroom window. Now, I could see little except the lovely, fresh green of the new young leaves on the beech trees at the bottom of our garden, and the darker, harsher green of the yews in the churchyard. Even the delicate, pointed spire of the church was half hidden by the trees. Beyond the churchyard, the Elbures' woods began, a symphony now in every shade of green.

On the hillside, I could glimpse Val's plantations of

young trees, larch and spruce and fir. When he spoke of them, the names sounded like poetry. They were his loves . . . larch and spruce and fir . . . beech and oak and sycamore . . . willow, poplar, and alder. He loved and cherished them as Father cherished his stamp albums. It was preposterous of Mrs. Catt to insinuate that Val could be lured or teased into chasing village maidens.

Miranda Penelly, indeed! Did I remember Miranda? Of course I remembered her; a big, buxom, comely wench with Spanish-looking eyes and hair.

'Do you remember an inn, Miranda?
Do you remember an inn?'

The verse came flickering in and out of my memory as I hurriedly combed my hair and put on a hat. Women wore hats, or at least headscarves, to church here. Father saw to that. In some ways, he was old-fashioned and a stickler for tradition.

The melodious peal of the bells had ceased. One solitary bell was calling urgently: 'Come! Come! *Come!*'

I snatched up my handbag and gloves and ran downstairs. I knew to a second how long it would take me to leave the house by the back-door, scurry down the weedy flagged path to the gate in the wall, cross the churchyard, and reach my usual pew. I was never late. Father wouldn't have permitted that.

The kitchen was deserted now, except for the large ginger cat, cleaning himself on the mat by the back-door. I stepped over him carefully, but his lips curled upwards and he spat at me.

'Oh!' I said, startled. 'You horrid old thing! What have I done?'

By way of response, he tried to scratch my ankle. I eluded his claws and shut the door on him. It was a trivial incident, but I found it oddly disturbing. I had been proud of the fact that I could always make friends with children, dogs, and cats. More often than not, they attached themselves to me without any effort on my part.

It was something new for a cat to spit at me and try to claw me.

True, to the ginger tom, I was a stranger. He hadn't been ensconced in the kitchen last time I had been home. Mrs. Catt was no recent addition to the household, though, and she, in her own sly fashion, had also tried to scratch me. I had an absurd conviction that she had been responsible for the ginger cat's hostility. Why? I wondered helplessly. What had I done to incur her spite?

CHAPTER XI

Do you remember an inn, Miranda?

II. BELLOC

Inside the church, I was lapped around by the familiar peace. It wasn't a large church. It was old, but not old enough to interest historians. To me it was beautiful, with its own particular kind of beauty. I loved the delicately curved arches, the smooth dark wood of the pews, the softly glowing colours of the stained-glass windows, and the intricate carving on the pulpit and choir-stalls.

The church was dedicated to 'All Souls', and I had a conviction that everything within it had been created or given by people who had loved it, as I did. 'All Souls' had a much homelier and more comprehensive sound than 'All Saints', I thought. It included all of us . . . past, present, and future worshippers here. It was our church in a very real sense of the word.

Watersfall was only a village. For these days, we were an oddly self-contained community. The nearest seaside resort, where our 'waters' flowed into the sea, was six miles away. The nearest market town was farther than that. We were right off the main roads. Charabancs and buses didn't attempt to navigate our narrow, winding lanes. Tourists seemed to happen upon us chiefly by chance. Perhaps our isolation was responsible in some degree for the surprisingly good congregations.

As Aunt Beatrice put it: 'What is there for anyone to do here on a Sunday evening? Sleep, make love, get into mischief, or come to church . . .'

The choir was undoubtedly one of the attractions. The choir-master was an elderly musician, once a celebrated organist but now crippled by arthritis. He lived at the

school-house with his middle-aged, unmarried niece, the village school-mistress. He had a happy knack of kindling enthusiasm, and he was a born teacher. Our choir had competed with success in quite a number of musical festivals. Val and his father were both members of it.

I felt suddenly self-conscious when the choir filed into the church and came in slow procession up the aisle. I didn't want to see Val or his father. What must Uncle Willoughby—as Ursula and I called him—be thinking of me? That I had been responsible for a disastrous accident to his elder son, and had promptly ratted on him? He and Val had a good many tastes in common, but it was Patrick who was the pride of his heart. He took Val for granted as a typical Elbure, cut to the age-old pattern of the countryman—land-owner.

Patrick was the star; the brilliant and unexpected. Patrick had inherited his brains and his temperament and his finely chiselled profile from his mother's family. All he had from the Elbures was the glint of auburn in his brown hair. Uncle Willoughby was red-haired, freckled, short, and massive; an older and even plainer version of Val.

They brought up the rear of the procession together, immediately in front of Father. I gazed at them covertly, but neither glanced in my direction. Val, for all his natural flippancy and irrepressible spirits, had always been a model of decorum once he had donned a surplice. In our childhood, Ursula and I had sometimes tried to catch his eye and make him grin or snigger. We had never succeeded. He had worn an expression of calm absorption as though it were a mask.

I could see him now, in memory, as a small, solid-looking boy in the front row of the choir-stalls, singing as if he had no other means of self-expression. There had been, at one time, talk of his training to be a professional singer, but his father had firmly vetoed that. It had sounded much too chancy and ephemeral a profession to commend itself to an Elbure.

Had Val been disappointed? I didn't know. He hadn't said so. But, now I came to think of it, Val never had groused or played for sympathy. He had clowned his way out of any pertinent questions. He had refused to be serious about himself or his future.

Perhaps that had been reaction from Patrick's purposefulness and sense of dedication. Patrick had never wavered in his ambitions. I tried to visualize him here, in the Elbure family pew, but I couldn't. He had been away so much. He had never seemed to belong to Watersfall as Val had. Even his vacations had been spent chiefly in pursuit of his chosen goal.

It would be unutterably, heart-breakingly cruel if he were to lose all he had worked for, simply through that one senseless escapade. He would never forgive me. I should never forgive myself. I should have to devote the rest of my life to trying to make it up to him. I shouldn't succeed . . . because no one could. It was a bleak prospect.

Suppose all went well? Would he forget this period of suspense? Would everything be the same again between us? Or would he always subconsciously hold it against me?

I kept on seeing his white, tortured face and hearing the husky savagery in his voice. I kept on feeling the steely grip of his uninjured fingers and the hurting pressure of his lips. Once again, my heart had that dreadful, over-full sensation.

I couldn't concentrate on the service. I was conscious of it and yet detached from it, as if shut off by a closed window. Nothing really reached me till Val stood up to sing 'O rest in the Lord . . .'

That had always been a favourite of mine. I shut my eyes. I did not want to look at Val. His commonplace figure and plain face were all wrong with that glorious, poignantly clear tenor voice. It should have belonged to Patrick. Val was so essentially of the earth, and that voice was out of this world.

Tears pricked behind my eyeballs and forced themselves

slowly and painfully from under my eyelids. I was absurdly responsive to beauty . . . seen or heard. If I had only to listen to Val and not to look at him, perhaps I shouldn't mind being his wife. Perhaps Father was right, and I wasn't adult enough or clever enough for Patrick. Oh, but did anything matter in comparison with my whole-hearted love for him and his for me?

Father's sermon, on 'Greater love', was one that I had heard before, but this evening the theme of self-sacrifice had ceased to be abstract to me. It was something which might concern me very closely. Suppose getting engaged to Val wasn't sufficient to squash the gossip? Suppose ugly rumours still clung to Patrick on account of that midnight meeting? Ought I to clear his name by confessing that I had begged him to meet me? That would be self-sacrifice, presumably, but it would also be a lie.

Would it demonstrate that 'greater love', or not? As Father was pointing out, to die for another person was very rarely demanded of us. The test came more often in living than in dying. I would do almost anything in the world for Patrick, but could self-sacrifice entail the sacrifice of one's own integrity? Must I—could I—acknowledge that forgery as mine? Was I holding back from principles or from pride? After all, to pretend to be engaged to Val was acting a lie. Yes, but it was his pretence, his lie, rather than mine. He had forced it on me. He must take it on his conscience. Or was that mere quibbling?

I tried to pray, but I couldn't find the right words. I had to fall back on the childish 'Please bless Patrick and Val and Ursula and me and show us how to do Thy Will'.

'The Peace of God' seemed as beautiful and remote as a sunset-tinted sky. I knew It existed, but I couldn't feel It. At least, not tonight. Tonight, I was restless and feverish and all churned up inside me. I lingered on my knees, as the congregation passed down the aisle. I couldn't talk to anyone tonight.

When I thought the coast was clear, I made for the side

door. It was twilight, and at first I didn't notice the two figures, standing under the big yew tree, near our garden wall.

It was the name 'Miranda', spoken in Val's easily recognizable voice, which pulled me up short.

'I'm sorry, Miranda, but that's how it is,' he said coolly.

I didn't catch her response. It sounded breathless and angry.

Then, Val's voice reached me again.

'There's no question of that. Of course you won't be left to go through it alone. Simmer down, now! There's plenty of time . . .'

I felt suddenly sick. I turned and fled back to the church. I didn't want to interrupt what was obviously a highly confidential conversation. Nor did I want to overhear any more of it.

I leaned against the heavy oak door, my fingers clenching and unclenching themselves round the iron handle. Was there a very real foundation for Mrs. Catt's unpleasant insinuations? Had Val been fooling around with the housemaid? Was he being called to account for it now? Had he—unnerving thought—forced that conspicuous ring on my finger for his own protection, not mine?

A dull anger began to smoulder in me. Mixed with it was a painful sense of loss. I had never thought a great deal of Val, but I hadn't suspected that he would ever refuse to foot a bill. It wasn't like him to squirm and wriggle away from the consequences of any escapade. Usually, he met them head-on, with reckless good-humour. Ursula had frequently deplored his 'don't care' attitude. I had insisted that 'so—what?' described it more accurately.

Whatever his faults, Val wasn't a coward. I was, I realized in bitter self-contempt. I was cowering here in the shadows, because I was afraid to face the significance of that interview between Val and Miranda. I ought to be ashamed of myself. I wasn't even sure that the girl with him was Miranda Penelly. I fancied I had caught the name 'Miranda'. I could have been mistaken.

The lights were being switched off in the church. I saw the windows going dark behind me. Any minute now, Father would appear, on his way to the garden door. If that meeting under the yew tree was to be broken up, it had better be done by me rather than by Father. In spite of his sometimes abstracted manner, Father was intuitively perceptive. He knew Miranda well. He had christened and confirmed her. He would sense that she was in some kind of mess, and question her. Involuntarily, my mind had shied from the phrase 'in trouble', and substituted 'in a mess'. She would blurt out the whole story. Something about Father invited confidences. Perhaps it was that we all knew he could be trusted to respect them. He was the very reverse of that clerical horror—the chatty, gossipy parson.

Miranda had undoubtedly a claim on his advice and sympathy, but it was suddenly intolerable to picture her appealing to him, while Val and I stood by, unable to silence her. My misgivings swallowed up by a greater fear, I hurried back along the path. Before I reached the yew tree, I met Miranda face to face. She was stuffing something into her handbag. I noticed inconsequently that it was an expensive looking, pigskin handbag. Did I hear the crackle of £1 notes? No, that must be my too vivid imagination. £1 notes didn't crackle . . .

'Why, it's Miss Evelyn, isn't it?' she said, pausing.

'Yes. Hello, Miranda! How are you?'

My voice sounded unnaturally cordial, but she didn't appear to notice it. She shrugged her shoulders in a petulant gesture.

'Oh, not so dusty! I've left the Elbures'. That old hag of a cook spun a pack of lies about me to your aunt. Mum reckons I ought to have sued her . . . but it weren't worth my while,' she said defiantly. 'I got a better job right away in the Weirside Hotel. Shorter hours, more money, and good tips . . .'

'Oh! Well, that's splendid,' I said weakly.

She gave a kind of flounce, which set her black curls

bouncing. Once she had had silky blue-black hair down to her waist. Since I had last seen her, it had been cut and set in numerous curls. It wasn't the right style for her Spanish good looks, and the pert little hat of red roses and black veiling perched on top of her head was equally inappropriate. She was wearing a short red jacket and a tight black skirt, thin nylon stockings and high-heeled, black sling-back shoes. Under the bright lights of a big city, she might have passed muster. In the twilight of a country churchyard she looked ridiculously out of place.

'You still nursing?' she asked, with an uneasy familiarity. 'What a job! Wouldn't catch me at it; not if I was paid ever so.'

'It isn't everyone's choice,' I said evenly.

'They're saying in the village that you've been sent home in disgrace, Miss Evelyn, for hitting the high spots after dark,' she went on, with a half suppressed titter. 'There wouldn't be any truth in that, I'm sure . . . you being the Vicar's daughter an' all.'

'It's odd how rumours start, isn't it?'

'You're telling me!' Her sloe-black eyes stared at me with curiosity, untinged by any hostility. 'If ever you're looking for a quiet weekend, you ought to try the Weirside. My, we see some goings on there!'

'Really?'

'Chaps don't realize that you can't keep anything dark in the country,' she said shrewdly. 'Well, good luck to you, Miss Evelyn! I don't bear you no ill-will.'

'Is there any reason why you should?'

My throat felt suddenly dry. Miranda's curls bounced again.

'Some might think so, but I don't. Cheerio!' she said jauntily.

Afterwards, when it became desperately important to remember every detail of that brief encounter, I still couldn't say that I had glimpsed any suggestion of despair in Miranda's manner. It had been pervaded by an uneasy jauntiness, I was sure. She had wanted to behave as if

she and I were old acquaintances on an equal footing. That was why she had emphasized the advantages of her new job and decried mine. We were both earning a living. The difference lay in the fact that she, the farm-hand's daughter, was earning good wages. I, the Vicar's daughter, wasn't.

There had been something else, of course; something which I was reluctant to recognize. Without mentioning the Elbure men, she had, in a slyly defiant fashion, contrived to imply that she and I were both interested in Val. What else could she have meant by her lofty: 'I don't bear you no ill-will . . .' ? She was the loser. It was I, not she, who wore Val's ring. She must have meant that. What else?

I remained as if rooted to the path, deliberately savouring the bitter mortification of it. Miranda had gone tripping away, to her home in the village, but I could still see her, in her cheaply smart clothes, stuffing something into her incongruously expensive handbag. She had always, now I thought of it, been apt to assume an embarrassing familiarity, possibly on the grounds that she and I had attended the same confirmation class, in Father's study, and been confirmed on the same occasion. Or it might have been before that, when we had belonged to the same Girl Guide patrol in the village.

I hadn't disliked or resented the girl. I had simply been embarrassed by her. During her time at 'Many Waters', as Aunt Beatrice's housemaid, she and I had rarely met. When we had, she had invariably hailed me as a dear old friend of her childhood, even though she had addressed me as 'Miss Evelyn'.

This evening, her familiarity had been jauntier and more assured. She had been tacitly insisting that we were 'sisters under the skin'. It stung intolerably . . . not that she had spoken to me like that, but that I could have been so readily fooled by Val. How had he dared to use me in this humiliating way?

Anger overcame my paralysis, just as earlier it had overcome my shrinking from what I might discover. I walked on to the garden door. It was ajar. I stepped into the garden . . . and into Val's arms.

Shock and revulsion made me strike out at him blindly.

'Hello! Hello!' he said in a tone of ingenuous astonishment which infuriated me. 'What's all this? Did you mistake me for a smash and grab merchant?'

'That's just about what you are, isn't it?' I said angrily.

'I beg your pardon?'

He let go of me. He seemed suddenly taller and older, towering above me in a formidable fashion.

'You know what I mean,' I blazed. 'I saw you . . . with Miranda Penelly. I dodged back, so as not to embarrass you. Then . . . then . . . I met her on the path . . .'

'Is that so? What do you imagine you saw? Not any tender embraces, I assure you.'

'It's rather late for that, isn't it? From what I can gather, you've had your fun and now you're being confronted with the bill.'

He took that in absolute silence. It was the one reaction I hadn't expected. Against his silence, my anger seemed to quiver and break, like a wave on a rock. I could almost feel it washing back over me; recoiling on to me as if I, not Val, was the guilty one.

I turned towards the kitchen door. I wouldn't—couldn't—withdraw what I had said. If I had been mistaken, why couldn't he tell me so? He came after me, walking just behind me. I had a feeling that he might grab me by the hair and shake me . . . as if we were still children. I could sense his anger, cold and penetrating . . . anger, not shame or remorse. Anger at being found out by me? Or anger at the accusation I had hurled at him? How much had he read into it? How much had I intended him to read?

I said uncomfortably: 'I didn't suggest that—that it was more than a silly flirtation.'

'Thank you,' he said in a cool, remote voice. 'A silly flirtation being my usual line?'

'No. Of course not. Oh, I don't know!' I stammered confusedly. 'How can I know? I've been away so much.'

'What did Miranda say to distress you?'

'Nothing, really. It was her manner . . .' I hesitated, unable to put my discomfort into words. 'And Mrs. Catt's. Mrs. Catt's horribly nasty about Miranda's being dismissed by Aunt Beatrice . . .'

'Gossip. Rumours,' he said contemptuously.

'Yes, but——' I swallowed hard. 'You gave her money, didn't you? Why?'

'I can't tell you.'

'Blackmail?'

'You must think what you please. It hasn't anything to do with you. It can't touch you in any way.'

'Can't it? If you faked this engagement for your own protection from Miranda, it certainly has something to do with me.'

'Oh, Baby, is that what's rankling?' His voice had thawed. It was warm again, amused and relieved. 'You're utterly wrong. You're the person in need of protection.'

'I'm not,' I said crossly. 'Even if I had enemies at St. Chad's, I haven't any here. Besides, I agreed to the pretence on Patrick's account; not my own or yours.'

'Never mind why. You did agree and that's enough. You can't back out of it now, at a moment's notice and for the flimsiest of reasons,' he said firmly. 'I've already broken the news to Father and Aunt Beatrice.'

'Oh! Weren't they surprised?'

'Dumbfounded,' he said calmly.

'I still don't think it was a very sensible move. Suppose Patrick misconstrues it?'

'Suppose you stop worrying about Pat and worry about yourself for a change? Who's to say that you haven't enemies here?'

'This is my home . . .'

Then, the garden door opened again and Father

appeared. He smiled at us benignly, as if concluding that he had interrupted a romantic interlude.

'It's a little chilly now and the dew is falling,' he said mildly. 'You'd better bring Evelyn indoors, my boy. You'll have supper with us, of course?'

'Thank you, Uncle Lawrence. If Evelyn has no objection, I would like to stay,' Val said easily.

If I could have thought of a plausible objection, I might have voiced it . . . or I might not. I was in a jumpy, uncertain mood. I was resentful of Val and suspicious of him, yet half ashamed of my suspicions. I was enraged by his control of the situation, but I didn't want him to go. I dreaded being left to my own haunting fears and memories. His presence, however exasperating, could at least keep them at bay. Moreover, I meant to get to the bottom of his session with Miranda.

Supper was well cooked and adequate—veal and ham pie and salad, followed by rhubarb meringue, cheese and biscuits. Mrs. Catt was undeniably a competent cook-housekeeper. She was so pleasant and purry, as she served us, that I began to wonder if I had imagined that hint of malice in her, earlier this evening. Nothing was apparently too much trouble for her now. She even insisted on making tea as well as coffee, because I preferred tea at night.

We had adjourned to Father's study when the telephone bell rang. The telephone was perched precariously on his desk amongst the debris. I was nearest to it, so I reached for it, disentangling the cord from a roll of notices for the forthcoming Easter Day Services, and sweeping an ash-tray full of paper clips to the floor. Val bent down to retrieve the clips and I called 'Hello!'

'Hello! Is that you, Evie?'

'Yes. Oh!' I caught my breath sharply. 'Ursula?'

'Yes, darling.'

'Why—why have you rung up?'

'I just wanted to make sure that you had reached home safely. I know what Val is . . .'

'He's perfectly safe, even if he does drive fast,' I said

defensively. 'We got home in good time for Evensong. How's—how's Patrick?'

'Rather badly upset, I'm afraid.'

'Oh! Oh, why? What has happened?'

'That little boy—Jimmy. Remember him?'

'Yes. Yes, of course. He—he isn't dead?'

'He's not expected to last the night. His parents were here this afternoon. It was a dreadful shock for them. The mother was almost fainting. I had a hectic time, trying to soothe her. Of course, she blames Patrick for having risked the operation.'

'Oh, no! That isn't fair. Jimmy would certainly have died—or gone blind—if Patrick hadn't operated. Didn't you make his parents understand that?'

'All they could grasp was that Jimmy had had a relapse—and that Patrick wasn't on call as he should have been,' she answered ruefully. 'People never are fair or reasonable when they're upset. The parents are blaming Patrick, and Patrick is blaming you. Sister is blaming everyone within range. You're lucky to be out of it.'

'Oh, no!' I said again, wretchedly. 'Oh, he mustn't die! He's a dear little boy . . .'

'Try not to worry, darling. You can't do anything about it now. And, as I said before, I don't believe in that silly superstition about deaths coming in threes. It would be ghastly for you to feel yourself responsible for three deaths.'

I began to shudder. I couldn't help it. I fought to keep my voice steady.

'Never mind about me! Just try to make everyone realize that Patrick wasn't to blame. It's his reputation which matters.'

'That's how I feel. He hasn't deserved to suffer like this. Shall I tell him that you want him to show your note to Matron?'

'Yes. Yes, if you like. If you think it'll do any good. It wasn't *my* note . . . but she won't know that. Even Patrick didn't believe me . . .'

'Evie darling, I'm sure you'll feel happier when it's off your conscience, when you've done all you can to make amends. I know you so well,' she said gently and affectionately. 'Do take care of yourself and don't brood! After all, as Val would say there are plenty more small boys in the world. So long!'

'No. No, he wouldn't,' I protested dully, but the line had gone dead.

Val took the receiver from my unsteady hands and replaced it. Then, he lifted me into an armchair and sat down on the arm of it. He took my hands in his and chafed them . . . as if he could sense the deathly chill inside me.

The last of my anger died away like a spent match, in a forlorn little fizzle. This was no time to care what Val had or hadn't done. He had elected himself my champion, and I couldn't send him away. He was the only person who believed in me. I hadn't anyone else. I couldn't count Father because, naturally, he would take my word for anything. There was only Val . . . and I needed him terribly. Who else could guess at the nightmares in my mind and fight them?

Miranda was all right. Whatever she had done, she couldn't be held responsible for three deaths. If she had any claim on Val, she could establish it later. Just now, he was the life-line to which I must cling or drown.

CHAPTER XII

Icy current and compulsive course . . .

W. SHAKESPEARE

All day long, the rain had been descending in torrents. The streams were muddied and swollen. The sound of rushing, falling water had beaten itself into my ears until I felt dazed and oppressed by it.

Now, just when the day was nearly over, the rain had ceased, and there were spasmodic gleams of watery sunshine. I rose from my knees in the study, tired, dishevelled, and depressed. The carpet certainly looked all the better for my ministrations, but I rather would imagine that I had swept away numerous treasures. I had picked up every stamp and placed it safely in a tray. I had used a damp cloth as a duster, so as not to send things flying. I had reduced the study to a semblance of order . . . and now it had an oddly alien air.

When I had emptied the dustpan, I would clean myself up and then go out for a breath of air, I decided. I felt restless and uneasy. Father was out, taking a Lenten service in a neighbouring parish. Val was away on a job. It was Friday night . . . and I hadn't seen Val since Tuesday. It seemed an unconscionably long time.

He had rung me up every evening, but telephone calls weren't what I wanted from him. Over the telephone, I had really nothing to say to him. It was the comfort of his warm, solid presence I craved.

He had said he would come home tonight if he possibly could. He had promised to call at St. Chad's on the way, although it would mean a wide detour, to bring me the latest news of Patrick. He had warned me that he would

probably be very late, but I had insisted that I should wait up for him.

It would seem absurd to 'dress up' for Val, but I could at least change out of my faded jeans. It was chilly after the heavy and unseasonable rain. That was a good excuse for putting on my wine-red velveteen skirt and the jersey which matched it.

In a mackintosh and gum-boots—in case there should be more rain—I would stroll down the lane to the waterfall, half a mile away. It would be a spectacular sight after all that rain, particularly if Uncle Willoughby had had the sluice gates opened at both ends of the lake. All day, the lake itself had resembled a rough sea in miniature. When I had dashed down to the village for groceries, I had longed for Val to take me out on the lake in his speed-boat. He loved rough water and so did I. It was a pity he was missing today's. I didn't like to take his speed-boat out on my own, even though I was officially his betrothed. Val wouldn't mind, but Aunt Beatrice might.

Since her marriage to Uncle Willoughby, Aunt Beatrice was very much an Elbure. She was more possessive over the Elbures and their belongings than they themselves had ever been. She didn't, I had sensed, quite approve of my engagement to Val. Whether that was on my account or his, I couldn't divine. When she chose, she could be as reserved and restrained as Ursula. Of course, I was in disgrace with Aunt Beatrice now because she held me responsible for Patrick's injuries, and she adored Patrick. She had made no secret of that, and I had lacked the energy to amend her garbled version of the facts. I had kept away from 'Many Waters', and contrived to dodge her in the village.

I heard a car on the gravel just as I was struggling into my gum-boots. I was surprised by the sudden, wild flutter of my pulses. Was I, then, so nearly defeated that I could get all excited about Val, simply because he was my ally? I hadn't realized that my courage had fallen so low.

The front door swung open before I could reach it. The

graceful figure in the white plastic mac and hood seemed to me for a startled moment like a ghostly apparition.

I stopped short and Ursula cried gaily: 'Surprise! Surprise!'

I must have moved then, because I was clasped in her arms. The white plastic felt cold and slimy against my bare arms and throat as she hugged me. I hugged her back again mechanically, but I was miserably conscious of the sudden slowing down of every pulse in me. It shouldn't have been like that. I ought to have been as glad to see Ursula as to see Val. Why this queer shrinking away from her?

'It—it is a surprise,' I said lamely. 'How come?'

'You knew I was due for leave. Didn't we plan to come home together for Easter?'

'It isn't Easter yet,' I said stupidly.

'This coming Sunday is Palm Sunday. Today week is Good Friday,' she reminded me. 'Besides, I was worried about you, darling. I pictured you all alone and moping here. Nanny wrote that you were restless and nervy.'

'Oh! Mrs. Catt wrote to you? About me?'

'Not specifically about you. She often writes to me,' Ursula said casually. 'Where is the old lamb? I must just greet her before I dash on home.'

I couldn't see Mrs. Catt as an 'old lamb', but Ursula always brought out the best in people, I reminded myself. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Catt was devoted to Ursula, if not to me. Somehow, it was distasteful to think of our house-keeper's reporting on me to anyone . . . even to Ursula.

I remained in the hall while Ursula went on to the kitchen to greet her 'Nanny'. I took down my mackintosh and put it on, fastening it with fumbling hands. I walked out to the porch, breathing quickly and deeply. I had been indoors too much today. That was why I was edgy.

Then, I saw the car drawn up on the gravel. I blinked incredulously. It was Patrick's car; his long, slender, black saloon. Had he let Ursula drive home in it? He

was usually so touchy and possessive over it. He had never allowed me to take the wheel.

It was only a trifle; a pin-prick, yet it hurt out of all proportion to its size. It seemed one more wedge between Patrick and me.

I started when Ursula touched me lightly on the shoulder. She had come up behind me silently. Glancing down, I noticed that she was wearing white rubber boots, damp but as spick and span as if she hadn't stepped on any muddy ground in them.

'Patrick's car . . .' I said—and stuck.

'Yes. He can't drive while his arm's in plaster, so he thought I might as well have the use of it,' she answered easily. 'You know what it is at home. Mother hates to lend her coupé, and Uncle Willoughby is nearly always using the estate car, when one wants it. Just like Patrick to suggest my taking his, wasn't it?'

'How is he?'

'It's difficult to tell. Mr. Manuden remains mildly optimistic.'

'Oh!' I was fidgeting with the ring on my third finger. 'What—what does Patrick think about this?'

'That it's an excellent idea . . . an excellent cover-up for you.'

'For *me*? It was meant to make things easier for him. He doesn't suppose it's a genuine engagement, does he?'

'He doesn't suppose it will last, anyway, genuine or not. He knows what Val is.'

She laughed, and I was seized by a sharp, irrational anger.

'Oh, does he? Do you? How fond you are of saying "I know . . . him or her", aren't you? Yet what do you know of people as they really are, deep down inside them? What does anyone know of anyone else?'

'It's ridiculously simple to see through most people. You, darling, are as transparent as glass.'

'Well, you're not. Nor is Val.' I looked at her appraisingly. 'What have you against him?'

'Against Val? Why, nothing serious! Poor old Val! He can't help being a bit of a fool.'

'Not so much of a fool as you may think. He plays himself down most of the time. In an emergency, he's there . . . just when he's needed.'

'You certainly seem to have found a use for him. Are you going to keep that ring, afterwards? Then, what a pity he didn't choose one in better taste!'

I flinched involuntarily. Then, to my inward astonishment, I found that it hadn't hurt, after all.

I snapped back: 'Why, Ursula, that sounds quite catty! Surely, you're not jealous because mine is the first engagement ring in the family?'

She looked down at me, serene and unruffled, a sparkle of amusement in her beautiful eyes.

'I hear the echo of Val's voice, don't I? You mustn't take his opinions too seriously. I'm afraid they're generally distorted by his jealousy of Patrick.'

She hadn't even deigned to answer my impulsive taunt. I felt small and deflated. She was right, of course. Ursula was always right.

'Are you going out, Evie? Can I give you a lift?' she asked lightly.

'No, thanks.' How could I bear to drive in Patrick's car, with Ursula at the wheel, in calm possession? 'I'm only going for a breath of air. Down to the falls.'

I said that at random, because it was in the opposite direction to Ursula's. She would have crossed the estuary by the old bridge, half a mile below the falls. Nearly all the village was on this side of the lake. Only a few cottages and the Weirside Hotel were on the other. The Elbures' house stood at the head of the lake and could be approached from either side. Ursula had come this way so as to call in at the vicarage *en route*. I ought to be grateful to her for that. She must be longing to get home and relax, after her solitary drive.

'The falls? Oh, yes! They're a wonderful sight. You mustn't miss it. Quite like the celebrated waters at

Lodore,' she said eagerly. 'Too chilly to appeal to me, but I know what a passion you have for water . . . you and Val.'

'Chilly? I don't propose to bathe in the lake tonight.'

'I find it chilling just to look at such a torrent of water. The weight of it must be terrific. You'd better not try conclusions with it, darling.'

She laughed again. She was in unexpectedly good spirits this evening, I thought, puzzled by her air of elation. Was it merely that she was glad to be home again? But . . . she loved St. Chad's. She always appeared loth to take her leave.

'How's Jimmy?' I asked, as she turned towards the car. 'Jimmy?'

For a split second, her face was blank. That gave me a nasty little shock. The small, freckle-faced boy was so very much on my mind . . . and he was in her ward. From her omission of any news of him, I was dreadfully afraid that he was dead. I had scarcely dared to ask . . . but I had to know.

'Oh, Jimmy!' she said, almost impatiently. 'He's still holding his own. Sister thinks he'll be all right.'

'He will? Oh, that's marvellous! Why didn't you tell me?'

'I'd forgotten your special interest in him. You take things so to heart, darling. I wish you wouldn't,' she said compassionately. 'Now, you must get moving, or it'll be dark before you reach the falls.'

The sun had set behind banks of ominous, stormy-looking clouds. There was scarcely any light left. In the dark, Ursula's white mackintosh shimmered in an eerie fashion. The white hood, above her smooth fair hair, might have been a halo. St. Ursula, I thought affectionately, but with unfamiliar reservations. There were times when her very virtues made her appear remote and slightly inhuman. As always, I knew that I could never live up to her. She affected Rosemary like that, too. That

was why Rosemary and her gang hadn't voted for 'St. Ursula' as May Queen.

'You haven't told me much news,' I said, pausing beside the car, as she slid in behind the wheel. 'What about the May Queen festivities? Has there been a fresh ballot?'

'No. Matron wanted me, as runner-up, to take it on, but, naturally, I refused.'

'Oh! Why? You were the obvious choice in the first place. It was the merest fluke that I got a few more votes.'

'Darling, how could I seem to be profiting from that miserable affair? I would much rather keep right out of it, especially as I'd set my heart on your being crowned. Perhaps Matron may relent, yet.'

'Oh, no! I'm sure she won't.'

'Then, there'll have to be another ballot. Or else Matron herself must step into the breach. Who cares?'

Again, her light, melodious laughter sounded in the silence, and sounded strangely in my ears. I couldn't see anything even mildly amusing in her extravagant suggestion. It came most oddly from Ursula, of all people, habitually such a traditionalist. She was in an exalted mood tonight. Or was she just trying to cheer me up? I wondered perplexedly. Was she making light of the May Queen ceremonies in order to lessen my disappointment? That would be typical of her elder-sisterly attitude towards me. She had always striven to protect me.

'See you in the morning, Evie!' she said, starting up the engine. 'I'll drop in for elevenses and we'll have a good talk. Now, I'm longing for a hot bath and a hot drink.'

'Yes, of course. Sorry! I mustn't keep you.'

She drove away, leaving deep tracks on the weedy, soaking wet gravel. A chilly little wind seemed to come back at me, from her going. It wasn't at all a pleasant evening. Was it worth while tramping through the saturated lanes down to the falls? I almost turned back into the house, only I was reluctant to be involved in a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Catt, who would most certainly be calling upon me to enthuse over her nursing.

Mrs. Catt, after a glimpse of Ursula, was wont to behave like a mother hen, clucking to everyone to admire her precious chick. From her manner, one might imagine that she personally had endowed Ursula with golden hair and blue eyes.

I couldn't expect Val yet, and Father was unlikely to be home to supper. I might as well walk down to the falls. Ursula had evidently thought them worth seeing, although usually she scarcely noticed them. She wasn't really a country-woman or a country lover at heart. At 'Many Waters', her interest was concentrated on the house rather than on the gardens, woods, or waters. Ursula could take an almost sensuous satisfaction in sorting and handling piles of smooth, lavender-scented linen, just as Aunt Beatrice would, in a lady-like fashion, gloat over rows of neatly labelled home-made preserves and bottles of fruit. They were feminine and domesticated, both of them. In me, the same blood ran more swiftly and wildly, driving me out and about, to find my exhilaration in speed-boats and rushing water, in the grave peace of the woodlands, and the rise of trout in a favourite pool. I could be happy, drifting idly in a punt on the lake, or watching the deft flick of Val's flies on the water, or swimming beneath the alders on a hot summer's day. Woods and streams seemed my natural habitat. I thought of them—I yearned for them—in the astringent, impersonal, bustling atmosphere of St. Chad's. I tried to forget how the sun could gleam on the water, how a trout could flash silver as it leaped for a fly, and how divinely sweet and cool was the water of those dancing streams which fed the lake.

Love meant self-sacrifice. Patrick cared for none of these things, and for his sake I must be exiled from them. They were my love offering to my love.

Only, now, temporarily, I was free. I needn't feel guilty about my sense of escape. Hadn't even Ursula shared it this evening? True, she had come home for some well-earned leave, and I had been sent home in disgrace, but what virtue was there in brooding over my mistakes? Why

not adopt Val's philosophy, and take life as it came? Jimmy wasn't dead—wasn't going to die. That was cause enough for rejoicing. Perhaps the tide had turned for me. Perhaps Patrick's injuries had been grossly over-estimated.

I splashed and squelched my way down the lane and the wind whipped showers of raindrops into my face. I liked the feel of them, just as I liked the dank, earthy, leafy smell in the air. Far away, I fancied I heard the first cuckoo. Nearer, owls were hooting and swooping. I must hurry, or the owl-light would have gone before I reached the falls.

Yet I had to stop to pick a bunch of primroses. They were so utterly delicious, all fresh and fragrant from the rain, even though some of their petals were discoloured. There were celandines studding the banks, and tiny wild violets and starry white stitchwort. Oh, lovely to be at home in spring-time! The neat ranks of tulips and daffodils, in the flower-beds at St. Chad's, could give me no such sense of ecstasy. They were told how, when, and where to flower. These wild things flowered as they pleased, for the sheer joy of it.

Patrick would say I was being childish and absurd. He would point out the biological and horticultural facts. Well, let me be childish tonight, romp through puddles, and gather primroses, imitate the cuckoo's call, and flap my hands at the owls in a vain attempt to divert them from their defenceless prey.

So I came to the falls; to the thunder and roar and spray, to stand spellbound on the top step which led to the sluice-gates. There was a narrow plank bridge and a narrower handrail over the falls, easily crossed when the waters were low by anyone with a steady head. Now it would be perilously slippery, because the foaming torrent was washing over it in places. Indeed, if one tried to cross by it, one would almost certainly be swept off one's feet by the fierce current. To my astonishment, the sluice-gates were closed. Always before, when the lake was swollen by rain and flooding streams, Uncle Willoughby had the sluice-

gates opened so that the water could rush harmlessly away into the estuary. Had he had a fancy to turn the falls into a miniature Niagara? Or had he gone out for the day without issuing the necessary orders?

Could I operate the gates single-handed? I doubted it. I should have to hold on to the rail tightly with one hand. I couldn't hope to turn the wheel with the other. I stepped on to the plank bridge tentatively. Instantly, the water tore at my ankles, with savage, icy tentacles. I could feel the chill of it right through my rubber boots. I could feel the force behind it, too.

Fascinated, I stared down at the foaming whirlpool beneath the falls. It was like a witch's cauldron, with sticks, leaves, straw, and all kinds of debris being churned round and round in it. Then, in the muddy, foam-topped cauldron, I glimpsed what I took to be black fur. I thought in sharp revulsion that some brute had drowned a cat there. Not all its fabled nine lives could have saved a cat if it had been thrown over the falls today. Useless now even to attempt to rescue it.

Was it a cat? Surely, the fur was too long for a cat's? It was more like black seaweed. The waters boiled and whirled . . . and there was momentarily a patch of bright red . . . a large, swirling patch. It looked like cloth . . . like a coat.

My foot slipped. If I hadn't been clinging to the rail I must have gone over, into the torrent. Somehow, I fought my way back to the blessedly solid concrete steps. I had known fear before. I had been desperately afraid in the belfry and after. This was worse than fear, though. This was a dreadful, sickening, unnerving horror. I wanted to turn away and rush up the lane, back to the vicarage and safety. I didn't want to look at that red and black thing in the whirlpool. I didn't want to know what it was. The light was very dim now. My imagination might easily be playing tricks on me. It could be anything . . . old clothes . . . a discarded scarecrow . . . even a dilapidated rag rug.

Whatever it was, it had no connection with me. I hadn't thrown it over the falls. I couldn't get it out. I couldn't do anything except run away and try to quiet my quivering imagination. No. I couldn't run away. I had to know.

Sliding and slithering, clutching at slimy reeds and trailing alder boughs, I stumbled down the steep, muddy bank. There was an alder quite close to the whirlpool. I got my left arm locked round a convenient bough, and went on, into the water. Usually, it was shallow close to the bank. Now it was over my rubber boots and up to my knees with my first few steps. My feet felt like lead. My left arm was almost dragged from its socket. The water was up to my waist. If I lost my armhold or my footing, it would be the whirlpool for me, too.

I reached out with my right hand. After what seemed a nightmare of interminable groping among nameless horrors, my fingers gripped sodden cloth. It was almost wrenched away from me but I hung on desperately. I forced myself to look. Even with spray in my eyes and in the fading light, I knew what I was holding. Perhaps I had known intuitively, as soon as I had glimpsed that red cloth.

'Miranda . . .' I said through clenched teeth. 'Miranda . . .'

Even if the roar of the falls hadn't drowned my husky voice, she couldn't have heard me. She wasn't struggling at all. She was as inert as any half-sunken log. She might only be unconscious. If I could get her out and start artificial respiration, she might stand a chance. That was why I clung to her coat, although instinct told me it was already too late . . . much too late.

Was that a car? I tried to shout, but I had no breath. My heart felt like bursting. I was being pulled in half.

All at once, I was aware of movements behind me. Someone was slithering down the bank. Just for a moment, the worst horror of all gripped me. I thought feverishly that whoever had thrown Miranda into the whirlpool had come to throw me in after her. And, without leaving go of her, I couldn't turn my head to face him. I couldn't

put up any kind of fight. My left arm was almost numbed as it was. One push would send me headlong into the whirlpool. Oh, terror! Oh, now I knew what it was to have the blood in one's veins freeze through sheer panic!

Then, there were hands on me, an arm round my waist . . . another, stronger hand reaching out to grip that sodden coat.

'Steady! Hold on just a little longer . . .' Val's voice called in my ear.

He was taller than I; taller and heavier. He waded in deeper. The water rushed at him, but it didn't sweep him off his feet. He got a hold on that helpless, water-logged body. He began to back towards the bank.

I heard him say again: 'Hold on! No, not to her. I've got her. Hold on to the alder.'

It was like Val to say 'the alder', not 'the branch', or 'the tree', I thought, sobbing half hysterically, as the weight was taken from my aching right arm. I wanted to help him. I wanted to follow him up the bank, but I couldn't. My feet were either numbed or stuck in the river mud. I couldn't shift them. I struggled, gasping and sobbing, till he was beside me again, his arms around me, steadily. He almost carried me up the slippery bank. I had forgotten—or perhaps I had never really known—how strong he was. Like a cart-horse, I thought, dragging on him, scarcely able to lift my water-filled boots, and sick with the pain in my wrenched back muscles.

'Miranda . . .' I panted, when I could speak. 'It is Miranda, isn't it?'

'Is it? Yes. I suppose so,' he said in an unnaturally level, expressionless tone. 'Are you all right? Good heavens, what a shock you gave me! Why must you do these crazy things?'

'I? I do crazy things?' I echoed stupidly.

'Going in after her. You might have been drowned.'

'I had to try.' I shuddered. I forced myself to kneel down beside that limp, pitiable figure. 'Can—can you do artificial respiration?'

'Yes. We must try, of course, but I'm afraid it's too late. She's probably been in the water for at least an hour.'

'You don't know. You're only guessing. Oh, Val, don't let her die!' I said wildly. 'Oh, if only you were a doctor . . .'

'It wouldn't make any difference.'

He had turned her over and was kneeling on her, working rhythmically, as I had been taught long ago, long before St. Chad's, in my Girl Guide days. Val had pulled off her red jacket, to get at her more easily. She was wearing a primly plain black frock . . . her uniform, I supposed. She must have slipped out from the Weirside Hotel and tried to cross the falls by the plank bridge.

Why? Why, on such a night and with that torrent washing over the planks? What had brought her out tonight? A date? A date which she had felt compelled to keep? With whom?

'Who? Why?' I stammered. 'Oh, Val, was it you?'

'What?'

'Was she—was she on her way to meet you?'

'Certainly not. How would she know that I was coming home tonight? I didn't know it till five o'clock, when I'd managed to get everything in order, the last tree planted, and the rabbit netting safely in position.'

He spoke in short, sharp jerks. He was breathing hard, but not as though he were in any distress. I felt irrationally angry with him, because he hadn't shared my horror and panic.

'Don't—don't you care?' I said resentfully.

'I'm doing what I can for her,' he answered curtly. 'You're wet through and shivering. There's a raincoat in the car. Put it on. There's brandy in the flask in the pigeon-hole. Have a swig.'

'I'm all right . . .'

'Do as you're told!'

The curt, authoritative tone sounded more like Patrick's than Val's. Perhaps, that was why I obeyed him automatically.

When I brought the flask back to him, he had stopped working on Miranda. He was feeling for her pulse.

'Try the brandy,' I said desperately.

'It's no use, my dear. She's gone.'

I knew it was true. Perhaps I had known it when I had first glimpsed her red jacket in the whirlpool, yet I couldn't bring myself to admit it, and his attitude seemed to me hatefully cold-blooded. Particularly after his interview with her last Sunday evening . . .

'You don't care. Perhaps you're even secretly relieved,' I burst out hysterically.

'Don't be childish!' he retorted calmly. 'Caring or not caring can't alter facts. Go and get into the front seat of the car!'

'Why?'

'Because we'd better take her along to the doctor. It'll be quicker than fetching him. Mind?'

'No. Of course not. I'm a nurse,' I said defensively.

Only, it was different in the wards of St. Chad's. People in bed, whether they were recovering or not, were creatures subject to routine and order. There was nothing violent or shocking or totally unnecessary and accidental in their condition. It went more or less according to expectations, duly noted and charted like the voyage of a ship. I had seen deaths, of course, but with a kind of sad resignation. This was infinitely worse. This was tragic and horrible. This was someone who only a short time ago—perhaps only an hour ago—had been alive and well, full of vitality and cheerfully impudent. Why should death have reached out for Miranda and pulled her down like this?

Blinded by a rush of hot, angry tears, I picked up her once jaunty red jacket. I could never like red again . . . never wear that vivid geranium red again. It would always remind me of this grimmest of grim evenings.

I couldn't even be glad that Val had come to my rescue. I couldn't be grateful to him. I slumped down in the front seat, clutching the red jacket, and keeping a discreet distance between us. He had put the rug over the back seat.

Out of consideration for my sensibilities, I supposed, but the gesture jarred on my raw nerves. It was as though, with it, he was trying to obliterate Miranda and her fate. It was like pulling up the sheet . . . and he wasn't a doctor, a Sister, or even a nurse. How could he be sure that Miranda was dead?

Water was dripping from him. His tweed jacket and corduroy trousers were saturated. His red hair was damp and untidy. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead before he started up the engine. The smart green leather of the cushions would never be the same again, I thought inconsequently. We should leave mud and flood water all over them.

'Brace up, Evelyn! It isn't far,' he said encouragingly. 'Try another swig from the flask.'

'Why must you fuss over me?'

'Isn't the answer obvious? Because you're my love and extremely precious to me. You shouldn't have had this shock on top of the other. The two combined would knock any girl sideways.'

Some nasty, mocking, haunting demon in me wanted to ask: 'And Miranda? Wasn't she once your love, too? When did she cease to be precious to you?'

I bit my lower lip hard to keep back the words, but they seemed to hang in the air between us, unspoken.

When I thought I could control my voice reasonably well, I asked instead: 'Why did you stop, just there? You couldn't have seen us.'

'I slowed to look at the falls. I saw to my astonishment that the sluice-gates were closed. I got out to open them. Who closed them? Any idea?'

'No. None at all. Presumably, they weren't opened today.'

'Oh, nonsense! If they hadn't been open at all, the lake would be overflowing and this lane would be flooded. There must have been an immense volume of water passing through the lake today.'

'Yes. Yes, of course. Why would anyone shut the

gates, though? It doesn't make sense,' I said in bewilderment. 'Not that it matters.'

'It mattered to Miranda. Quite evidently, she didn't expect the rush of water over the planks. In those ridiculously high heels, she hadn't a hope of keeping on her feet.'

'Was she wearing high heels? I didn't notice.'

'Well, I imagine so. She always was, if my memory serves me. Of recent years, that is. Aunt Beatrice used to grumble about them, and warn her that she would sprain an ankle.'

I remembered then that, when I had seen that limp figure on the bank, she had been shoe-less. She must have lost her shoes in the whirlpool. Who could say now whether they had been high-heeled or not? What had made Val speak with such certainty?

'No,' I said desperately. 'No!'

This tragedy was surely enough. It didn't need a bulk of doubts and fears and grim suspicions behind it. I mustn't ask why Miranda had been crossing by the planks. I mustn't wonder how Val knew that she had been wearing high-heeled shoes. I must rein in my thoughts. I must accept the facts, without questioning them or pondering over them. It was just an accident; a tragic accident which might have happened to any girl.

Yes, but it hadn't happened to any girl. It had happened to Miranda. What had Val said to her on Sunday? That she wouldn't be 'left to go through it alone'. Through what?

Mercifully, it wasn't far to the doctor's house; an old, grey stone house, standing back from the lane, on a rise in the ground. The doctor was a man in the sixties, semi-retired, but still coping with sickness and casualties in and around the village. He was tying up the honeysuckle over his porch, which had been wrenched and battered by the deluge. He waved his secateurs at us cheerfully, and called to Val to steady the steps for him.

'Not now! This is rather urgent,' Val said quickly.

While Val was telling him what had happened, the doctor was clicking the secateurs and his teeth in an abstracted but maddening fashion. I wanted to scream at him to stop it.

'You shouldn't have brought her here,' he said reprovingly. 'What are the police going to say to that?'

'The police?' I echoed.

'There'll have to be an inquest,' he said shortly. 'Bring her in, then, and I'll have a look at her, before we ring the police. Barmaid at the Weirside, was she?'

'No. Waitress. She used to be our housemaid,' Val said briefly.

'Ah!' Dr. Chilton said profoundly. 'Your housemaid? That wouldn't, I take it, give you any incentive to tamper with the evidence?'

'No. None. Why should it?'

'You might know her and her family well. Naturally, her family would prefer it to have been an accident.'

'What? What else could it have been?' I asked defensively.

'It might have been suicide,' the doctor said dispassionately. 'With young girls, it's always a possibility.'

That ominous sentence seemed to hang in the air like a heavy, black cloud, as Val lifted the rug-covered burden from the back seat.

I nearly cried out: 'Oh, hurry! Don't stand there arguing about why she died, until you're certain she is dead. Hurry!'

Only, I didn't say it. I knew that for Miranda there would never again be any need for hurry.

'I'll run you home in a minute. Wait for me,' Val called, as he followed Dr. Chilton into the house.

I got out of the car stiffly, my water-sodden clothes clinging to me clammily. Of course I would wait. I had to hear the doctor's verdict. I had to hear what else he would say. He was a comparative newcomer to the village. He had inherited this old stone house from an aunt, five years ago. The village had welcomed him because, prior

to his arrival, our nearest doctor had been seven miles away, but I hadn't seen much of him or his wife.

Mrs. Chilton was reputed to be a dreadful gossip, but Aunt Beatrice rather liked her. She was an energetic little woman, a keen gardener and a born organizer of fêtes and bazaars. I wondered apprehensively what she would make of Miranda's death. Already, I was beginning to perceive that the accident theory had holes in it.

Miranda had been born and bred in Watersfall. She knew all about the falls. She hadn't been a casual visitor on holiday, who might not have noticed the closed sluice-gates or realized their significance. Miranda would have seen the torrent rushing over the planks. If she had decided to risk it, she would certainly have held tightly to the rail. She might have lost her footing, but wouldn't she have saved herself by the rail? She had been young and strong and active.

I plodded into the hall. The surgery door was open. The doctor's voice reached me clearly. He sounded as if he were making an inventory of poor Miranda . . . approximate height, weight, and colouring, and her age.

In a moment, he would say: 'The well-nourished body of a young woman,' I thought, trying to check my rising horror and revulsion.

Then, Val came out of the surgery. He frowned as he saw me standing there.

'You're shivering. You must have a hot bath,' he said concernedly.

I heard the click of a receiver. Presumably, the doctor's inventory had been for the benefit of the police. How absurdly formal! Our village constable knew Miranda as well or better than he knew me.

The doctor emerged, clicking his teeth again.

'You shouldn't have moved the body. The police at Tretavy are quite annoyed about it,' he said fussily.

'Rubbish! I had Miss Shelley to think of, hadn't I? Would you have expected me to leave her there, while I

drove to the Weirside Hotel, to the nearest telephone?' Val said crisply.

'It's the usual procedure. One stays with the body and one goes to telephone the doctor and the police,' Dr. Chilton insisted.

'Usual procedure be damned! I couldn't risk Evelyn's catching pneumonia, simply in order to behave like a correct character in a crime story,' Val said impatiently. 'I'm going to take her home now. If the police want to interview us, they can come to the vicarage.'

'They asked that you should both wait here for them.'

'Wet to the skin? No, thanks!' Val put his arm round me and piloted me towards the porch. 'Besides, someone must break the news to the Penellys.'

'The police . . .' Dr. Chilton began.

'Certainly not. I'll go . . . or perhaps the Vicar would do it better,' Val said decisively.

The doctor was short and stout. His plump face turned an ugly beetroot red. He held up a podgy hand, as if to arrest our departure.

'Let me warn you, young man, that it's highly dangerous, as well as improper, to flout the police.'

'Who's flouting them? I'm merely using my common sense,' Val retorted, opening the car door for me. 'I have to think of Miss Shelley.'

'Ah, yes! Just so,' Dr. Chilton said, staring fixedly at my left hand. 'I believe you're engaged? My wife must have got it wrong. She heard that you were engaged to Miss Shelley's elder sister.'

I didn't trouble to put him right. I didn't like the way he was staring from me to Val, with a kind of speculative and resentful glitter in his eyes.

'Horrid old man!' I said impetuously, as Val swung the car round on the gravel and headed down the drive. 'He behaved almost as though we'd murdered poor Miranda.'

Val didn't answer. In the dim light, his profile seemed to change . . . to sharpen and harden, till it had the bleak, granite-like look which I had sometimes seen on Patrick's.

Fear touched me again, chilling my blood and making me gasp, as if from immersion in ice-cold water. What had I said? Had I tried for flippancy to cover my uneasiness? If so, I hadn't attained it. Instead, I had used a word which shouldn't even have been in my thoughts.

'Oh, hell!' I said desperately.

'Yes. I'm afraid it will be rather hell, unless or until the whole thing can be explained satisfactorily.'

'What do you mean by "unless or until"?'

'Shall we ever know the truth about it? Presumably, there weren't any eye-witnesses when—when she landed in the whirlpool.'

'You weren't going to say that. Why did you alter the sentence? Val——' I caught my breath painfully. 'Val, what are you thinking? That it was suicide? Oh, no! I'm sure it wasn't.'

'I'm sure, too. Unfortunately,' Val said grimly.

CHAPTER XIII

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth.

W. SHAKESPEARE

It wasn't until I was upstairs in the bathroom, peeling off my soaking clothes, that I saw I was still clutching that pathetically jaunty red jacket. Afterwards, I was to wish most bitterly that I had left it on the river bank or thrown it into the water. It was some lazy memory of the phrase 'personal effects', which made me drape it over the towel rail.

The Penellys were a large and growing family. Possibly, one of Miranda's sisters—stolid and unimaginative—might be glad to wear the red jacket. Something clinked in it; clinked against the rail. I felt in its pockets. I drew out a tortoiseshell powder compact and a sodden handkerchief. There was something sticking to the handkerchief; a pulpy piece of paper. I shouldn't have given it a second glance if I hadn't seen the crest on it.

As it was, that clanging stag sent a cold wave of panic right through me. The last time I had seen it had been on Patrick's note to me; the note which had brought disaster on us . . . the note which might or might not have been forged.

Why, if he wouldn't take my word for it, should I take his, unquestioningly? Why should I believe that the note I had received had been a forgery? I thought confusedly. Then, I realized that there would have been no point in one forged note. Our unseen, unknown enemy had wanted us both in the belfry. If I had kept Patrick's note, he would have been obliged to accept my defence.

Gingerly, I eased the pulpy paper away from the handkerchief and spread it out on the window-sill. Faint and

blurred though it was, the handwriting was quite recognizable, even without the flourishing signature: 'Val'.

'Val? Oh, no! No,' I- said miserably. 'Not Val. Please . . . not Val . . .'

I almost seized the paper and completed its disintegration. Almost . . . not quite. The memory of Miranda stayed my hand . . . of Miranda saying with childish bravado that she didn't bear me any ill-will. If Val . . . I tried to brace myself. It was never any use to run away from the truth. I must know . . .

The note was brief and to the point.

MIRANDA DEAR,

Meet me at the falls on Friday evening around six. I've grand news for you, so don't fail me. It's urgent and essential.

Yours,
VAL.

Some of the words were practically illegible, but that was my reconstruction of them. It was close enough, I thought. Too close, perhaps. Certainly, too close for my peace of mind. Or Val's.

I had my bath. I even lay soaking in the hot water. There was no hurry. Father had gone with Val to the Penellys'. When they had broken the news, Father might linger to try to comfort them. Val would go home to have a bath and change. He would be back by and by, he had assured me. If the police arrived before his return, I could telephone to him.

The police? What was I to tell the police? Was I to show them this sodden scrap of paper—undoubtedly the key to Miranda's unhappy end? I couldn't. How could I? It might be a crime to conceal evidence, but how could I give Val away? How could I bring him under suspicion? How could I let everyone imagine that he was responsible for the tragedy?

He wasn't. *He wasn't*. He couldn't have foreseen that the sluice-gates would be closed. He couldn't have fore-

seen that torrential rain. He must have posted the letter yesterday, I reflected in deep relief. He couldn't possibly have guessed that it would be fatal to Miranda.

'Val is an opportunist . . .'

Who had said that? Ursula, wasn't it? Yes, but she hadn't meant anything like that. Val wouldn't have seized that kind of opportunity. Even in my thoughts, I shied away from defining it more clearly.

When I had dried myself and dressed, I carried that sodden note very carefully, on a face towel, into my bedroom. I hid it in the bottom of my wardrobe. I would have to ask Val about it, of course, but not anyone else. I couldn't tell anyone else.

I took out a black frock. Then, I hung it up again. I mustn't appear to be dramatizing Miranda's death. I settled for a plain navy-blue skirt and a matching jersey. Alas for vanity! My wine-coloured corduroy was ruined beyond hope. If it hadn't been, how could I have worn it again?

Val came back while I was brushing out my hair. I was suddenly loth to face him. I couldn't stifle a nagging fear that he might have saved Miranda . . . and hadn't. I couldn't quite believe that he had closed the sluice-gates, but I knew that only someone very strong and determined could have managed it. Unless, of course, they hadn't been open at all today . . . and that was a query which could easily be answered.

I stayed upstairs until a big black car drew up behind Val's. Two men got out of it. Plain-clothes policemen, I thought, and shivered. For the first time in my life, I was afraid of the police. I was afraid of their questions and distrustful of my own ability to answer them. I wouldn't lie to them, but I resolved not to tell them more than was strictly necessary. Why should I do their job for them?

Mrs. Catt came up to fetch me. She was flushed and breathless with excitement. Her bright black eyes were more avidly bird-like than ever.

'The police are here, Miss Evelyn dear. Mr. Val's giving

them his story now, but they'll want to check it with yours,' she announced eagerly. 'That Miranda! Well, I always knew she'd come to a bad end, but who would have guessed it would be so sudden? Is it true that she was in the family way?'

'What? Oh! I haven't any idea. No. No, I don't suppose it was true.'

'Just a rumour, I dare say. You needn't let it upset you, Miss Evelyn. There's lots of girls get themselves into trouble, more's the pity! You look quite shocked,' she said, staring at me as if I were a juicy caterpillar. 'After all, it's three months since your aunt sent her packing.'

'What do you mean by that, Mrs. Catt?'

'I was only trying to set your mind at rest, my dearie. That Miranda must have met men in plenty since she left "Many Waters". Who's to say that this young fellow or that was responsible?'

I knew then what she was implying. I felt a sudden loathing for her, as if she were something slimy and repulsive.

'I'm not your "dearie", Mrs. Catt. You're thinking of Ursula,' I flared. 'You hate me. You'd like to see me pulled down, wouldn't you? Why? What have I ever done to hurt you?'

'It's not what you've done to *me*.' For once, her full some manner had dropped from her. There was a hard, accusing note in her voice. 'It's my Miss Ursula you've robbed and cheated. Everything she sets her sweet heart on, you grab away from her. So innocent-like you look, that even Mr. Val calls you "Baby", but you know how to get your own way, don't you? May Queen, all decked up in white with a crown on your head . . . Mr. Patrick mad for you . . . and now Mr. Val buying a car and a grand ring and who knows what else for you . . .'

'Oh! Oh, goodness gracious!' I broke in, divided between exasperation and pity. 'What nonsense! It's quite the other way round, I assure you. Ursula is the loved and admired and envied. At St. Chad's, they call

her "St. Ursula". I'm the one who's always in hot water.'

'And the men go plunging in to rescue you. I know. I've seen it,' she said darkly. 'She's like a beautiful lily, but you're the one who sets men thinking of a kiss and a cuddle. "Sexy", they call it nowadays, and most unbecoming in a vicar's daughter, it is, too.'

'That's ridiculous . . .'

I checked myself firmly. I wouldn't argue with her. She was just a stupid, spiteful old woman, preposterously jealous for her beloved nursing. Only her undoubted affection for Ursula could excuse her crude attack on me. If Father had heard it, he would have risen up in wrath and banished her.

'All right, my lady! Just take care that you don't end in the whirlpool, when his lordship's tired of you,' she hissed at me.

I ran past her and down stairs without answering. I could feel the blood ebbing away from my cheeks. It wasn't true—it couldn't be true—but rumours like that were more easily circulated than suppressed.

I heard voices from the dining room when I reached the hall. I hesitated for a moment. Then, I took the plunge. I couldn't leave Val to face the police alone.

He had changed into a dark lounge suit. He so rarely wore a suit that he looked oddly sombre and unfamiliar in it. By a minor coincidence, it was a navy blue suit. Obviously, his mind had run on the same lines as mine, avoiding black as too funeral, but thinking that light colours would be in poor taste.

I had never seen Val in that particular suit before. I found myself wondering why and when he had acquired it, and where or for whom he had worn it.

I said: 'Good evening!' to the policemen, and ignored the chair which one of them indicated.

I went to Val's side and perched myself on the end of the mahogany table. That way, I was facing and able to look down on the burly middle-aged Superintendent, who had seated himself at the head of the table. He had

a note-book open in front of him and a ball-point pen in his hand.

I knew him vaguely by sight. He had been in the district all his life. His assistant was younger and slimmer, with a keen, rat-like face and a hungry gleam in his eyes. I sensed that he had difficulty in restraining his impatience with his more ponderous superior.

'Miss Shelley has been badly shaken by her grim experience. Please be as brief as possible,' Val said formally.

The formality sat as incongruously on him as the elegant dark suit. I glanced at him . . . and our eyes met. His were very green against the brick-red of his weather-beaten skin. That was a danger signal, I knew. Had the police been grilling him? Why had I wasted time upstairs with Mrs. Catt? Now I had missed the beginning of the interview and I couldn't be sure what he had said. Suppose my version didn't tally with his?

The Superintendent was slow and heavy and excessively thorough. Before I had answered half a dozen questions, I felt ruffled and confused and guilty. He gave me the impression that he knew I was a criminal and was determined to bring my crimes home to me.

How could I explain just why I had chosen to walk down to the falls this evening? My plea that I had wanted 'a breath of fresh air' sounded lame and unconvincing, repeated in his stolid voice. Why had I gone in that direction? he asked again.

'Not to meet Miranda Penelly,' I snapped.

He was on to that like a terrier after a rat. Had I any reason to suppose that the deceased had crossed the falls to meet someone?

I cursed my unguarded tongue. I couldn't—I wouldn't—look at Val.

I said defiantly: 'She must have crossed the falls for some reason . . . even if it was only like the ancient riddle about the chicken . . .'

'The chicken?' he echoed, as if I had introduced a fresh suspect.

'Why does a chicken cross the road? To get to the other side,' Val said helpfully.

The Superintendent frowned at both of us.

'I'm trying to establish the state of mind of the deceased,' he said weightily.

'Don't call her that! Miranda . . .' I swallowed hard. 'I don't know anything about her state of mind. Except that she was quite jaunty on Sunday evening. That was the last time I spoke to her.'

He pounced on that eagerly. He took me back to Sunday evening. He tried to turn my exchange with Miranda inside out and persuade me to read some inference into it. I blocked his questions stubbornly. I didn't—I wouldn't—admit that I had seen Miranda with Val. I said only that I had met her outside the church.

He tried to make something of the word 'met'. Was she returning to the church as I was leaving it?

'How would I know? I didn't ask her. She was walking in one direction and I was walking in the other. So we met. So—what?' I retorted.

'She didn't seem disposed to confide in you, Miss Shelley?'

'Why should she?' I countered. 'She was obviously happy in her job and enjoying life at the inn.'

'She might have been waiting to talk to the Vicar?'

'She might, I suppose. You can ask him.'

'Have you at any time seen her with a man or heard that she had any particular boy friend?'

'Oh, goodness, what a question! A girl with Miranda's looks and vitality must have had lots of friends. I certainly wouldn't have noticed any of them in particular. When I'm at home, I constantly see lads and lasses out courting,' I said airily. 'I don't keep a record of their goings and comings.'

He went on hammering at me. Suddenly, he asked about Miranda's handbag. Hadn't I noticed it?

'Yes. I noticed it on Sunday. It looked rather a nice one.'

'But . . . not this evening?'

'She didn't have it this evening,' I said crossly.

Again he pounced on what he took for an unwary admission.

'I did *not* see her, except in the water. I've told you that,' I said raggedly. 'I supposed she hadn't a handbag with her, because her powder compact was in her jacket pocket.'

That, of course, provided him with a new opening. Where was her jacket? Why had I taken it home with me? Where was it now? Didn't I know that I was tampering with evidence? What had I done with it?

Val intervened then, in support of my statement that I had been carrying the jacket absently, without realizing I had it. He tried to convince the Superintendent that I had given him all the information I could.

I stared down at the table. Was Val trying to protect me? Or was he afraid of what the Superintendent might drag out of me?

I volunteered to fetch the jacket, but the Superintendent said coolly that the Sergeant would get it.

'For fear I destroy valuable clues?' I demanded angrily. 'This is intolerable. I refuse to be catechized as though I had thrown that wretched girl over the falls. I nearly drowned myself, trying to pull her out of the water.'

'What makes you suspect that she was thrown over the falls?'

'I didn't. I don't. It must have been an accident. What else?' I said shortly.

'Suicide . . .'

'No. Certainly not. Miranda wasn't like that.'

My voice was breaking. Val put an arm round me swiftly. Somehow he contrived to insert his broad person between me and the inquisitor. He repeated that I had just been subjected to a severe shock and a grim ordeal. Any further questioning could wait till tomorrow.

The Sergeant came back with the red jacket. From the pleased look on his rat-like face, I suspected that he had had a few words with Mrs. Catt. What had she told him? He was eyeing Val much as Mrs. Catt had eyed me. Involuntarily, I pressed closer to Val.

The Sergeant presented the jacket to his superior, who examined it and frowned over the compact. Had there been nothing in the pockets except the compact? he demanded, scrutinizing me sternly.

'What else would you expect? A lipstick? Probably, it washed out of the pocket,' I said desperately.

'A lipstick? Maybe. Also a purse and a handkerchief.'

'She wouldn't have needed a purse, surely?'

'That depends upon where she was going. You would expect to find a handkerchief, wouldn't you?' he persisted.

What had I done with that sordid handkerchief? I couldn't remember. Probably, I had bundled it into the linen basket, with my wet, river stained underwear. Or had I left it on the bathroom window-sill?

I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter, but I was terrified lest a few betraying fragments of paper might still be clinging to that handkerchief. Had the Sergeant spotted it? Had Mrs. Catt?

There was a horrid tense silence. I didn't speak because I was certain I should say the wrong thing. My head was throbbing, and it was difficult to think clearly.

'That's all, then, Miss She'ly? There was nothing else in the pockets?' the Superintendent said at last.

'What is all this? Are you suspecting me of having stolen her purse?' I said, with an attempt at indignation.

'No, indeed. Certainly not,' he said, patently unamused. 'It did just cross my mind that you, being the Vicar's daughter and knowing the family, might be trying to spare the Penellys distress by keeping back the note . . .'

Was he a magician? How could he know that there was a note? I had never felt more pitifully vulnerable. It was as though he had stripped me of my defences. Only, I had to go on fighting him . . .

'The—the note?' I stammered. 'What note?'

'They nearly always leave a note,' he said flatly, as if that was an elementary fact which every child should know. 'Suicides.'

'Oh.' I caught my breath in painful relief. 'We're back at that, are we?'

'What did you think I meant?' His probing glance seemed once again to lay my defences bare.

'I don't know—and I don't care. There wasn't any note or any handkerchief or anything except that compact. Now, are you satisfied?'

To my dismay, I heard my voice rising raggedly. I bit my lower lip hard.

'Yes. Thank you! I'm sure we're much obliged to you, Miss Shelley,' the Superintendent said woodenly. 'Good evening, miss. Good evening, sir.'

I couldn't believe that it was over, that they were really going. It must be a trick to catch us off our guard, I thought dazedly.

Val went with them to the front door. I waited, in an agony of suspense, till he came back to me. I had heard the door close, but I was still afraid to believe that we were alone.

'Have they gone? Are you sure?' I asked feverishly.

'Yes.' His green eyes surveyed me frowningly. 'What are you so het up about, Baby?'

'What? You can ask "*what*"?' As if you didn't know,' I said furiously. 'I found it. I hid it. And—and now I've lied to the police. That's one thing I never thought I would do.'

'If you'll take a deep breath and explain what "*it*" is, we may get some place,' Val said coolly.

'The note, of course. It was in her pocket. I read it.'

'The note? She left a note? That's odd! It isn't at all in character. I could have sworn that Miranda had never even dallied with the notion of suicide. What did she say?'

'It wasn't her note. Of course she didn't drown herself. It was *your* note . . . your note to her,' I said bitterly

'Your note asking her to meet you tonight. I—I don't want to know anything about it except this. Did you close the sluice-gates?'

'No. Nor did I write to Miranda.'

'I saw the note. I read it.'

There was what seemed an interminable, freezing silence. I stared at Val defiantly. His features had that bleak, granite look which must always remind me of Patrick. His eyes were inscrutable as a cat's. He was standing easily, almost nonchalantly, on the hearthrug, but I had a feeling that all his muscles were tensed. I almost expected him to spring at me and throttle me.

Only, that couldn't be made to look like an accident, or like suicide, I reflected bitterly. Why didn't he just walk away from me? Why hadn't he just walked away from Miranda? Why this ruthless savagery, this cold-blooded scheming? Cold-blooded? But . . . Val wasn't cold-blooded. At least, I had never thought he was.

'She didn't have to die,' I said miserably.

'I couldn't agree more.'

'Then—then—*why*? It was so horrible and unnecessary. What did it matter what she said?'

'Obviously, it mattered very much to someone.'

His tone was unnaturally quiet and dispassionate. I would have preferred him to be angry or aggressive. Now, it was as though he were barricading himself behind steel palisades.

'Oh, Val!' My voice broke. 'If I can't believe in *you*—in someone—I shall go crazy. Soon, I shall be fearing that I'm responsible for Miranda's death.'

He didn't answer . . . and my own words rose up to accuse me.

'Perhaps . . . perhaps I was. That's what people will say. That I was engaged to you and so—so we had to get rid of Miranda.'

'*We*?' His tawny brows quirked upwards.

'I'm in it, too. I'm an—an accessory. I concealed the evidence and lied about it.'

'Suppose we examine this evidence together?' Val suggested, still speaking dispassionately.

Then, as I hesitated, he added coolly: 'Or are you afraid I might fall upon it and destroy it?'

I had a sudden, painful memory of Patrick, holding 'my' note carefully out of my reach. Was I to inflict that same smart on Val, who might—just might—not be any guiltier than I had been?

I pressed my hands to my damp, throbbing temples.

'Oh, what's happening to us? As if I could suspect you of destroying evidence,' I said impulsively. 'As if—as if I wouldn't destroy with my own hands anything which threatened you! Of course I would. Why not?'

'Justice . . .'

'What is justice?' I moved towards him and grabbed his arm. 'I hesitated because the note's in my wardrobe, and I daren't bring it downstairs. Mrs. Catt's eyes are too sharp.'

'Then, she'll certainly notice it, if you take me up to your bedroom.'

'Who cares? That kind of gossip won't interest the police.'

I was trembling again, though, and his big, firm fingers caught mine protectively and held them.

'You're afraid of the police,' he said slowly. 'I wonder why?'

'Because—because of you, of course. And because, when they start "inquiries", all sorts of things may come to light.'

We were crossing the narrow, dimly lit old hall. I heard the kitchen door open softly. I pressed Val's hand warningly. He nodded.

We went upstairs and along the corridor to my bedroom, without speaking. I closed the door after us as noiselessly as I could. A horrid, clammy excitement, half familiar, half terrifying, was engulfing me.

'This is like our games of hide and seek in the dark,' I said uneasily. 'Remember? At "Many Waters"? I was

scared of them, because I was the youngest and smallest.

'You weren't scared when I hid with you. Remember that?'

'Was it you who used to hide with me? I thought it was Patrick.'

'Wishful thinking, Baby. Pat was much too fine and lordly a figure to play nursemaid to a child nine years his junior.'

'He wasn't. Don't try to spoil my memories,' I said crossly.

He shrugged his massive shoulders. It was true that he had been kind to me in my childhood but, in his careless, happy-go-lucky fashion, he had been kind to everyone. Val had never had any discrimination, as Ursula had seen from the first. That was another reason why it was more than possible that he had flirted idly with Miranda. She had been a lively, handsome girl, oncoming and on the spot. Val might well have encouraged her, without guessing that she would become serious about him.

'The note,' he said with sudden urgency. 'Where is the note?'

'The note . . .' I said in miserable mockery. '"It is the note, it is the note, my soul . . . It is the note. Yet I'll not shed her blood, nor scar that whiter skin of hers . . ."'

I broke off, aghast at where my subconscious mind had led me. I looked fearfully at Val.

'"Put out the light, and then put out the light",' he quoted sombrely. '"When I have pluck'd the rose, I cannot give it vital growth again. It needs must wither."'

We faced each other across my cluttered, shabby bedroom. Then, unexpectedly, Val grinned.

'What a couple of hopelessly corny characters we are, Baby, to stand here, quoting *Othello* at each other, instead of getting cracking on the clues!'

I smiled shakily, in relief at the lessening of the tension.

'It's the rain, and being such a dark night,' I said incoherently. 'It's a regular *Othello* night. Just as wild and windy nights belong to *Macbeth*, and heavenly moonlight,

scented with flowers, to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. You know what I mean.'

'I know perfectly well. What still baffles me is the Othello in question. *Who*—who put out that wretched girl's light?'

'*Don't!*' I shuddered again. 'It could have been an accident.'

'An accident—on purpose? A contrived accident? Yes. Could be.'

I opened the wardrobe and carried the face towel carefully to my dressing-table. The pulpy paper was drying unevenly. In some places the ink was less clear now than it had been.

'Can you read it?' I asked uncomfortably. 'Perhaps it was an old note, but it is your writing.'

'My handwriting, but *not* my writing,' he amended, frowning over it. 'Or do you consider that style typical of me?'

'I—I don't know. I hadn't thought.'

'Then, *think* . . . now. Remember that I'm not supposed to have been writing to you, but to our ex-housemaid. Would you say that "Miranda dear" was quite my form?' he demanded ironically. 'Do I habitually address friends or employees as "dear"?''

'No,' I said, pondering it. 'No. Never "dear". You're more extravagant in your endearments.'

'Next point. Would I have ordered the unfortunate Miranda to meet me at the falls "around six"? A most unchivalrous assignation. She's to cross the falls and wait "around six", possibly in the rain, till I choose to appear. Is that how you would expect me to treat *you*?'

'No. Of course not. You would call for me. Only, I'm not Miranda.'

'Now, now! Don't bring snobbery into it. Why should I treat Miranda less gallantly if, as is implied, I was once fond of her? Don't you know that a man tends to adopt the same techniques to all his lady-loves?'

'Does he? Yes. Quite possibly that's true,' I conceded. 'You might have had reasons for not wanting to be seen with Miranda, though.'

'Then, why didn't I telephone her with the "grand news"? Why meet her? Especially *why* in a lonely spot like that? Anyone seeing us together there would have suspected a romantic interlude,' he said calmly. 'Next, would I have asked her not to fail me? Is that my line?'

'No. Not usually, but——'

'Admittedly, there could have been "buts". Pass that, then, and look at the final sentence. Would I have used a family catch-phrase to Miranda?'

'She would know "urgent and essential". She would be bound to, after her years at "Many Waters".'

'It wouldn't have registered on her. She would have considered it a childish, meaningless joke,' he said decisively. 'That was a bad slip-up, but I imagine that specimens of my handwriting were rarer than Pat's and less easy to imitate than yours.'

'What? Oh!' I stared at him incredulously. 'Are you making out that this note is a forgery?'

'It most certainly is. I never, on any occasion, penned it.'

'Oh, but——' I was completely at a loss. 'Val, that's ridiculous! They can't all have been forged. Three vital notes, I mean . . .'

He moved across to my bed. He laid his hand on the Bible which stood on the bedside table.

'Will it make you feel happier if I swear it on the Bible?' he asked unsmilingly. '"Cross my heart and hope to die" no longer seems strong enough.'

'Oh, don't! It mustn't come to that,' I said miserably. 'We've known each other so long. If I can't take your word and Pat's, just as I take Ursula's, whose can I take?'

'Better, perhaps, to take none. Sorry for the theatrical gesture,' he said briefly. 'A character who could plan such a convincing death for Miranda would scarcely balk at

perjury. All the same, you have my "Bible oath", if it's of any comfort to you.'

'Thank you. It is. Naturally, it is,' I said faintly.

He moved swiftly for a man of his build. Before I could guess his intention, he was at the door, and opening it precipitately. Mrs. Catt almost fell into the room. She glowered at him with beady black eyes.

'So sorry,' he said blandly. 'I didn't want you to catch cold in your ear. It's draughty on the landing.'

I held my breath, waiting for the explosion.

Instead, with a sour smile, she said: 'You're a great one for joking, Mr. Val. One day, you'll go too far and get misunderstood. Someone'll take you seriously. Some have already, so I've heard.'

'Some would be well advised to take me very seriously, Mrs. Catt,' Val said, with a hint of ice in his tone. 'I have a peculiar sense of humour. Some things don't strike me as even remotely humorous.'

'What I always say is least said soonest mended, and as a girl makes her bed, so she has to lie on it,' Mrs. Catt said hurriedly. 'I came up to tell you that supper's spoiling, Miss Evelyn, and your father's waiting.'

'Thank you. I'm coming,' I said promptly, turning to the dressing-table in the hope of screening the face towel from her prying eyes.

Val was also blocking as much of her view as he could. What had she seen? What had she heard, before he had flung open the door?

When she had retreated, we looked at each other in mute speculation.

Val came back to the dressing table, tested the moisture of the note, and then folded the towel over it.

'I'd better take this,' he said coolly. 'If it's left here, the Catt will smell it out and gloat over it.'

It had been my discovery, and I knew that I was morally responsible for it, but how could I appear to doubt Val? Besides, it might be dynamite. I wanted to be rid of it.

'All right. Take it away,' I said weakly.

He was smiling as he transferred the neatly wrapped square of linen to his pocket, but it wasn't his usual warm, endearing smile. It was the unconscious, formidable smile of a hunter sighting his quarry.

CHAPTER XIV

We are what suns and winds and waters make us.

W. S. LANDOR

'Of course she was in the family way. I suppose she lost her head,' Ursula said distastefully. 'I'm sorry for her parents. I hope the Coroner will pass it as accidental death. You'll have to give evidence, won't you?'

'Shall I?'

'You found her. At least, that's one version . . .'

Ursula was doing the flowers. The old, stained table in the garden room at 'Many Waters' had been covered with newspapers and all the vases had been lined up there in an orderly array. No one else, not even Aunt Beatrice, bothered to protect the old table with newspapers. Ursula couldn't tolerate mess of any description. She liked to roll up the remains of the foliage and shattered petals in the damp newspapers, after she had finished the job, leaving the table as neat and bare as before she had started.

She should be a theatre nurse, I thought, watching her deft, precise movements. She had a pair of large scissors in her hand. She was snipping tall white tulips all to exactly the same length and arranging them in an austere white pottery bowl. Her long, capable hands were sheathed in rubber gloves, which added to her surgical air.

'How does that look?' she asked, stepping back to appraise her handiwork.

'Chaste,' I said involuntarily.

Her arched brows puckered.

'That sounds like Val,' she said reproachfully.

'Does it? The tulips are beautiful, of course, but, all white in a white bowl, they are a little funereal. Why not mix some of the pinks or yellows with them?'

'That would spoil the effect. I'm going to do an all gold table piece now, with yellow tulips, yellow narcissi, jasmine, and a few deeper gold wallflowers. It will look wonderful on the dark polished table, especially by electric light.'

'Yes. I'm sure it will.' I moistened my lips nervously with the tip of my tongue. How could she be so calm, so complacently absorbed in table decorations? Did she imagine that the death of a village girl, even an ex-housemaid, was something right outside the life of 'Many Waters'? Had she dismissed it from her mind because it was 'messy', and so offensive to her?

'About Miranda . . .' I began again, desperately. 'Haven't the police been here, making inquiries?'

'Oh, yes! A very pleasant Superintendent called, with another man, but there really wasn't anything we could tell him. I hadn't seen the girl since Christmas. Mother hadn't seen her to speak to, since she dismissed her, weeks ago.'

'Why did Aunt Beatrice dismiss her?'

'Oh, the usual thing! Being slack over her work and staying out late. When Mother took her to task, the slut was quite impertinent. Obviously, she had to go.'

'She wasn't a slut.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, she wasn't. I daresay she scamped her work and was too fond of a gay time, but she wasn't a bad type. She was cheerfully cheeky and good-natured and pathetically eager to be one of us.'

'One of us? What do you mean by that?' Ursula asked sharply.

'She was out to improve herself. She tried to be smart and fashionable. She kept her hair and hands nicely. She was rather attractive.'

'So Val appeared to think,' Ursula said coldly. 'When I called her "a slut", I was referring to her morals.'

'Are you asking me to believe that Val—Val had an affair with her?'

'Not necessarily. She was always hanging round him

when she was here. He may have encouraged her, in his usual irresponsible way. I don't suppose he was serious,' she answered soothingly. 'How pale you are, darling! Have you been upset by that poisonous rumour about you? It's too fantastic for words.'

'What rumour?'

'That, when Val caught up with you, you were holding that dreadful creature's head under water.'

'No! Oh, no! What a vile rumour! Who on earth thought of that?'

'I wouldn't know. Don't let it distress you. As long as the police don't listen to it, the gossip will die down presently.'

'But . . . why?' I was floundering helplessly. I wished Ursula would stop snipping and clicking the scissors. 'What have I done to excite such malice?'

'You're reputed to have taken Val away from that slut. The gossips can't decide whether she drowned herself from pique or whether you pushed her into the water.' Ursula's lips were curling upwards in acute distaste. 'So messy! Let's forget it, darling.'

I stared at her in a kind of wonder. She was wearing a white twin-set and a tailored grey flannel skirt, with a plain rubber apron over it. She looked incredibly beautiful and immaculate. Her fine white brow was entirely devoid of lines. Her golden hair lay in smooth, orderly waves above it. Her blue eyes were shining in happy, absorbed contemplation of her flower arrangements. Her gloved hands were innocent of the mildest tremor.

It must be wonderful to have such self-control; such self-possession, to be always sweet and serene and lovely. Did nothing penetrate Ursula's defences? Or was it simply that she enjoyed the blessings of 'a good conscience and faith unfeigned'?

St. Ursula, indeed, I thought with affectionate admiration. She was up on a pedestal, right out of my reach. Yet, somehow, I didn't envy her. With all her beauty and serenity, she was just a little inhuman. Staring at her, I

wished suddenly that she had a few betraying lines around her eyes or mouth. In repose, her face had the smoothness of a mask, without any personality behind it.

'Ursula . . .'

'What is it, darling?'

She spoke gently and indulgently, as if to an importunate younger sister. I sighed. What could I say to her? She didn't—couldn't—understand my hopelessly mixed and conflicting emotions. She would be shocked by the state of my mind, could she see into it. She would call it 'messy'.

Her horror of mess and muddle was becoming an obsession. She had even shrunk from mentioning Miranda by name lest that should seem to bring the tragedy closer to this house and its occupants, I realized uneasily. She was deliberately detaching herself from it. Once she would have been my champion and my comfort. Why had she withdrawn from me now? It gave me a pang of loss.

'Tomorrow is Palm Sunday. Next Sunday will be Easter Sunday. The lilies of the valley will be perfect for the font, and there will be enough tall, white lilies for the altar vases,' she said, as if pursuing her thoughts aloud. 'I'll do the pulpit this year, with white hydrangeas and white narcissi and white tulips. It was utterly ruined last year by bunches of primroses.'

'We always have masses of primroses brought in for decorating, and they look fresh and spring-like, bunched around the top of the pulpit and on the window-sills,' I protested.

'The main decorations should be all white,' Ursula said firmly. 'Colours would ruin the effect.'

I didn't answer. She would have to fight that battle with the other female members of our congregation, some of whom prided themselves on their artistic floral displays. We had never had any all white decorations before, except around the font. I couldn't quite see Ursula's point. The determination with which she had made it had sounded almost fanatical, like the gleam in her eyes.

White for a bride, I thought inconsequently. White for

chastity and virginity. Not necessarily white for a funeral. Often wreaths were quite gay. They would be bright with spring flowers at Miranda's funeral.

'She oughtn't to have died,' I said forlornly.

'That's what came of not knowing her place.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what she was like. Always running after men,' Ursula said scornfully. 'If you want Val, he's up at the plantation.'

I felt my cheeks burning.

'That sounds as if you suspect me of running after Val,' I said, trying to speak lightly.

'Aren't you? I thought you were engaged to him.'

There didn't appear to be any answer to that. As I hesitated, Aunt Beatrice came into the garden room from the garden door. She was clad in serviceable heather mixture tweeds, a shapeless felt hat, and stout leather shoes. A trug basket over one arm was aglow with anemones and camellias.

'Well, Evelyn dear?' She gave me an unusually affectionate kiss. 'I hope you've recovered from your horrid ordeal? That tiresome girl! I never really cared for her. So bold.'

'I liked her.'

I wasn't sure why I had to insist on that. It wasn't strictly true. I had sometimes been amused by Miranda in our Girl Guide days. I had more often been exasperated by her, both then and subsequently. She had been what Mrs. Catt called 'a bold piece', embarrassing in her familiarity. Yet, now, I couldn't join in the chorus of her detractors.

'You look as if you haven't slept. You should get out into the sunshine, dear. It's stuffy in here and the scent is quite overpowering,' Aunt Beatrice said crisply. 'I've brought in some anemones, Ursula. There are masses of them.'

She would have put some anemones in Ursula's austere

bowl of white tulips, but Ursula snatched the bowl away from her.

'No, Mother. Please! Leave the flowers to me. Don't ruin a lovely arrangement with those cheap, gaudy anemones,' Ursula said reprovingly.

'They're nice and bright and cheerful. Willoughby grew them. He'll be hurt, if we don't use them,' Aunt Beatrice objected.

She reached for a silver bowl and began to mass the anemones in it. She was quite unruffled. In fact, she was smiling. She was a good-looking woman in her own particular style; fair and astringent, with neat, regular features. She hadn't Ursula's beauty. Aunt Beatrice's eyes were too small and pale and her nose was too pointed, but she had a pleasant smile. Neither she nor Ursula had much sense of humour. Both were inclined to magnify trifles.

Ursula was pale now, unnaturally pale, with her lips pressed hard together. She was clipping and clipping . . . without looking at her mother or at me.

After a prolonged pause, she said in a dry voice: 'I wanted that silver bowl for the narcissi.'

'Never mind, dear! You can use a glass vase. Anemones look so attractive, reflected in a silver bowl,' Aunt Beatrice said calmly. 'Did you hear that I took two "Firsts" for table decorations at the Spring Flower Show a fortnight ago, Evelyn?'

'No, Aunt Beatrice. I didn't hear that. Congratulations,' I said with an effort.

She proceeded to tell me what flowers and foliage she had used. I felt as if I were being stifled. How could she and Ursula become absorbed in arranging flowers, just as if this were any ordinary Saturday morning and the flowers must be 'done' freshly for Sunday? Was it nothing to them that Miranda, who had lived and worked in this very house, had been drowned?

'I think I'll get some air,' I said faintly.

'Yes, dear. You don't look well. How foolish to upset

yourself about that tiresome girl!' Aunt Beatrice said tolerantly. 'If you want Val, he and your uncle are up at the plantation. Isn't it nice to think that we shall have Patrick with us for Easter?'

'Shall we? Oh!' I caught my breath. 'Ursula didn't tell me . . .'

'He'll have to go back to have the plaster removed, of course, but he says he'll have a week or two here first,' Aunt Beatrice explained. 'He rang up last night.'

'Oh! Was—was there any message for me?'

Ursula shook her shining head.

'Mostly, we were discussing hospital news. Patrick is raging because some surgeon in America has been the first to perform an operation which he himself had in mind. He was telling me all about it. I can't give you the details now. Probably you wouldn't understand them, anyway. You're not surgically minded.'

'No. No, I'm not.'

I left mother and daughter in the dankly stuffy, over-scented room. I went out into the sun-shine. After yesterday's heavy rain, April had staged one of her characteristic moods of warm penitence. The sky was as blue as any summer day. The sun-shine was quite hot. The air was still moist, and alive with a myriad subtle fragrances, distilled by rain and sunshine.

It was the kind of morning to make one run madly through the woods, with their delicate tracery of budding leaves, warm, mossy smell, and rain-washed primroses. I felt my pulses tingle automatically, as my senses registered the familiar but ever to be savoured joys. Only, today, my footsteps lagged. It seemed a long, hot climb up through the woods to the new plantations, high above the lake.

I came upon Val and his father unawares. Val, in his shirt-sleeves and corduroy breeches, was on his knees, securing some gaps in the rabbit netting around the young trees. Uncle Willoughby was leaning on his heavy ash stick, gazing down at Val's flaming head. Uncle

Willoughby wasn't a demonstrative man. Even to Patrick, his manner was casual. It surprised me now to see the expression with which he was regarding his younger son. It held a kind of paternal tenderness.

'It all comes on you, old man. It scarcely seems fair,' he was saying.

'My shoulders are broad enough. I'll get by. Quite probably, nothing more will happen. It's just a matter of keeping an eye open.' Val said reassuringly, without raising his head. 'I could be wrong, at that.'

I'd like to think so, but you so rarely are.'

There was a slight pause. I wasn't consciously eaves-dropping. I had paused before leaving the shade of the old woods to get my breath. Val and his father were on the hillside in direct sunshine. I could see the moisture on Val's forehead.

I was loth to interrupt their conference. I was also loth to face Uncle Willoughby. I was afraid that he, too, might tease me about chasing Val. I was in no mood for any badinage.

'If nothing further happens . . . ' Uncle Willoughby said jerkily.

' "Leave her to Heaven." '

I might have braced myself and stepped forward if Val hadn't said that. I recognized the quotation, but I couldn't guess to whom he was applying it. To Miranda? But . . . Miranda was dead. 'And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge' couldn't be applied to her.

'Yes. I suppose so.' That was Uncle Willoughby, in an unsatisfied, disturbed tone, unfamiliar to me. 'Only, there's Patrick to be considered. We couldn't stand aside and let him marry her.'

'Good heavens, no! Don't worry! If there was any suggestion of that, I should take steps immediately . . . '

Oh, would you? I thought furiously. They were speaking of me. They must be. How dared they take it upon themselves to decide that I couldn't be allowed to marry Patrick?

'Steps?' Uncle Willoughby echoed dubiously. 'You wouldn't go so far as to marry her? That would be madness.'

'Certainly not. Marry her?' Val's tone was indescribable. 'I'm not the martyr type, Willie. Now stop worrying yourself white-headed.'

Val rose, dusting his hands. As if suddenly aware of my presence, he turned to face the path through the woods. I was obliged to walk towards him, as if I hadn't paused. I hoped he would attribute my heightened colour to the steep climb.

'Morning, Eve. All right again after your wetting?' Uncle Willoughby gave me a swift, concerned glance, as if he expected to detect some visible signs of my ordeal on me. 'Must have been a nasty shock. A warning to you to keep away from the falls in rough weather. We can't very well stop people from crossing by the plank, but we are thinking of erecting "Danger" notices.'

'No one would pay any attention to them. Why were the sluice-gates closed? That's what is still puzzling me,' I said quickly, thankful for a conversational lead away from what he and Val had been discussing.

Father and son exchanged glances. Both were frowning.

'Well—er—that's something we don't know,' Uncle Willoughby said uneasily, slightly stressing the 'know'. 'I opened them before mid-day, because the rain showed no signs of ceasing. Then I had to drive up to Bodmin and didn't get back till after dark. Val, of course, was away, and your aunt didn't go out all day. No one can tell us why and when the gates were closed.'

'Someone must know. Someone must have closed them,' I said baldly.

'Yes. Whether it was done through mischief or malice or thoughtlessness, no one is eager to own up to it,' Uncle Willoughby said ruefully. 'Probably, we shall have to resign ourselves to remaining in ignorance. Whoever was responsible, it was hardly a criminal offence.'

He changed the conversation then, abruptly, by asking

me if I didn't notice a difference in the young saplings. He touched on Val's plans for clearing away the scrub higher up and planting the ground to spruce.

Again, I was puzzled by his manner. He wasn't usually so voluble. It sounded as if he were working earnestly towards a suitable exit line. He found it eventually, and observed that he must cast an eye over the sties, to make sure that the pigs had plenty of straw before the man knocked off at twelve.

'Saturday, you know,' he added deprecatingly.

When he had been lost to sight down the path I had just climbed, I looked at Val challengingly.

'What's the matter with your father? Why is he so jittery?'

'Did you expect him to take last night's affair in his stride? He feels that we're responsible for the falls and anything that may happen there.'

'Does he also feel that you're responsible for Mianda?'

'The eternal Eve,' Val said reproachfully. 'Ignorance is so much more blissful, most of the time.'

'I don't like being in the dark.' I clenched my hands together. 'You were talking about me when I came up the path. Weren't you?'

'Were we? I shouldn't think so.'

He didn't look disconcerted or ruffled. He smiled at me. Then, he glanced at his watch.

'There's time to take a look at the Corsican pines. They were planted last autumn. I think they're going to do well,' he said cheerfully. 'Coming?'

I nodded. I toiled after him, over a stretch of very rough grass and scrub to the topmost plantation. Here, the trees were barely three feet high. While Val scrutinized them, as if they were soldiers drawn up for his inspection, I stood gazing down at the lake. In the sunshine, it was like a looking-glass. We were high above it now, with the sun beating down on our unprotected heads. I could see the falls clearly, and the bridge, half a mile below them.

I could see the placidly flowing stream which only yesterday had been a racing, muddy torrent.

I turned restively to watch Val. He was fussing over his baby trees as if he loved them, firming the ground around some, removing dead twigs from others, and making sure that the rabbit netting was secure. How could a man with a load on his conscience concentrate his attention on such details? Perhaps a hardened criminal could, but Val wasn't a criminal of any kind. At least, not technically. Even if he had written all three of those tateful notes, he hadn't committed any crime by so doing.

To close the sluice-gates hadn't been a crime. It couldn't possibly be called anything worse than 'an error of judgment'. To persuade me to wear his ring wasn't an offence, either. He had made it clear that our 'engagement' was solely in order to protect Patrick's reputation. Why should I feel so furious with him, because he had confided to his father that he had no intention of martyring himself by marrying me? I hadn't the remotest intention of marrying him. As for his assumption that he could stop Patrick from marrying me, that was quite preposterous.

'You can't!' I said, loudly and defiantly. 'No one can.'

'I can t—what?

'Stop Patrick from marrying me.'

He looked up at me with a quizzical grin.

'Did I say I could?'

'Yes. I heard you.'

'I can have a darned good try to induce you to marry me instead, at all events.'

'That wasn't what you said. You told your father that you weren't the martyr type.'

'How true! I didn't say so with reference to you, though, Baby. Listeners not only hear no good of themselves. They also hear snatches of conversation out of context,' he said mildly.

'Well!' I glowered at him. 'Do you deny it?'

'I deny the conclusion you've jumped to so hastily and

unflatteringly. We weren't even discussing you, my poppet.'

'You said "she" You also said "Leave her to heaven" Who was the "she", if it wasn't I?'

'It wasn't you'

I didn't know whether to believe him or not. His manner certainly carried conviction. It was calm and unperturbed, almost casual. There was no vestige of heat or guilt in it.

Your father. ' I said tentatively. 'Perhaps he'll tell me, if you won't.'

He gave a quick, exasperated sigh.

'Oh, leave poor Willie alone! He has more than enough on his mind.'

No one but Val ever called his dignified father Willie, just as no one but Val called Patrick 'Pat'. Val hadn't any proper bump of reverence for his elders and betters, I thought irritably. He was the only person I had ever heard call Aunt Beatrice Bee.

'You have a nerve, haven't you? Is it up to you to protect your father?'

If I don't, who will? My hide is a lot thicker than his,' Val said calmly. 'If you must know, I'm trying to keep him right out of the Miranda affair. I don't see any need for him to appear at the inquest. He didn't get back from Bodmin until long after it was all over.'

'Oh!' I said doubtfully. 'Then, how could he be brought into it?'

'The eternal Eve,' he said again, resignedly. 'Don't blame me afterwards if the apple isn't exactly palatable. You would have it.'

'Yes. I—I must know.'

'Miranda wasn't a bad kid, but she had ambitions. She wanted to try her luck in London. She expected us to finance her venture,' Val said slowly.

'Us?'

'The Elbures. Father, Patrick, and me. One of us or

all of us. She didn't care which. She was quite amiable about it.'

I felt myself beginning to tremble.

'About—about what?'

'She said she was expecting a baby. Whether it was true or not, I can't tell you. I don't believe for an instant that, if it was true, an Elbure was responsible. I can't picture Willie or Pat losing his head over a Miranda,' Val went on dryly. 'It would have been awkward if she had spread such a rumour round the village, though. Bee wouldn't have liked it at all, and Willie would have been intensely mortified. Pat . . . well, you can imagine Pat's reaction.'

'She wouldn't have dared to tell such a fantastic lie about Patrick. Or about your father, for that matter,' I said scornfully.

'You don't think so? Then, you under-estimated Miranda's nerve.'

'She may have tried it on with you, but not with them.'

'Unluckily for her purpose, trying it on with me was a wash-out. I saw no reason at all to pay her to suppress what is usually termed a bare-faced lie. I told her so. When she realized that I didn't represent easy money, she switched over to the others.'

'That's what you say.'

'You can ask them, if you like. Pat may deny it, but Willie won't. Willie's transparently honest,' Val said with unconcealed affection. 'It would rattle him badly, though, that you should hear such a sordid rumour, and he could never be certain that you wouldn't mention it to Bee or Ursula. Consequently, I would rather you didn't tackle him.'

'I won't. Of course I won't. It would be too dreadfully embarrassing . . . '

'You could take my word for it,' he said, quite quietly. 'Or is that too much to expect?'

'Oh, dear! I don't know. I just don't know. Mrs. Catt has already been hinting things about you and

Miranda. If—if it comes out at the inquest that Miranda was going to have a baby . . .'

'You could try using your intelligence. Can you imagine that I would throw a child of mine to the wolves, no matter who its mother might be?'

That pulled me up short. I stared at him. It wasn't the usual argument. Far from it. In such circumstances, even the mother-to-be was inclined to regard the coming child as a mere pawn. Val wouldn't, though. What he had said was entirely characteristic of him and his outlook, I perceived in swift relief. He might not have cared two straws about a girl like Miranda, but he would most assuredly have safeguarded his own child, at any cost.

'Yes. Sorry!' I said uncomfortably. 'I didn't really believe Mrs. Catt. Now I see that it couldn't have been true.'

'One doesn't want to blacken the girl's name, but I gathered that she had a good many male acquaintances. None, unfortunately, could or would supply her with the funds for her trip to London,' Val said wryly. 'On consideration, I decided that to stake her to it would probably be cheap at the price. I was to have given her the money, in £1 notes, after church tomorrow. £100. Not an excessive demand.'

'Not? I should call it quite excessive. It was sheer blackmail.' He didn't answer, and I asked sharply: 'Wasn't it? Was there a grain of truth in her story?'

'There could have been. However fertile her imagination, would she have made up such a story without any grounds whatsoever?' Val's tone was suddenly sombre. 'Three men in the family . . . and a lively, man-conscious wench. She probably got herself kissed, if nothing more.'

'Probably? Don't you know?' I said incredulously. 'You must know whether you kissed her or not.'

'Once. Last Christmas Day, in full view of Bee and Willie, Cook and the gardeners. When Christmas presents were being distributed to the staff,' he answered unhesitat-

ingly. 'Pat may have improved on that score. I don't know.'

'Then, you ought to know. Patrick wouldn't have touched her with rubber gloves on. Patrick—' I checked myself abruptly. 'Oh, it's an insult to him even to discuss it!'

'Such childlike faith and loyalty!' he said mockingly. 'Rather wasted on a man who takes it for granted. I have to fight for every grudging inch of faith which you concede me.'

'The evidence,' I began.

'As Uncle Lawrence would tell you, "faith is the evidence of things not seen". Oh, well, I can wait! We've all eternity before us. Isn't that a delectable prospect? We're not obliged to concern ourselves solely with "now" '

I shook my head helplessly.

'You are the weirdest mixture, Val. Sometimes, you talk like Father. Sometimes, you're exasperatingly flippant. I'm never quite sure how to take you.'

'Leave me to do the taking, Baby!' he said cheerfully. 'The wild daffodils are out in the Lower Woods. Did you know?'

'No. Why?'

'We can go back that way. There's something entrancing about wild daffodils . . . a fragile and ethereal air . . . and they come as a kind of bonus from spring. One expects wild snowdrops, primroses, violets, and bluebells, but not daffodils dancing in the woods. They really do dance, given the gentlest breeze.'

'I know. I've watched them.'

How many lovely memories, hidden in the secret places of my heart, were Val's, too? Perhaps I should have recognized his deep love for the woods and streams years ago, but, years ago, he had been inarticulate about things that mattered to him. Patrick had held forth concisely and purposefully on his ambitions. Not so Val.

'People come and go, but daffodils continue to dance in the woods, robins nest in the ivy on the boat-shed, and the

swallows return to build under the eaves of the stables,' he said meditatively. 'Consoling to think on these things, Eve. It gives one a sense of proportion.'

I wasn't sure how he arrived at that. I didn't care. If he was trying to distract my attention from our human problems, I was ready enough to be distracted.

It was pleasantly warm, but not hot, in the woods, down beside the lake. The daffodils had never looked more enchanting. They grew in a sheltered, remote stretch of the woods, accessible only by water or by the steep path Val and I had taken. Probably, that was why they had gone on flowering and increasing. No casual, predatory tourist had ever set covetous eyes and rough hands on them.

Even from the house, it was an arduous scramble, over the rocks and mud around the lake, to reach them. Consequently, Aunt Beatrice and Ursula left them alone in their forays after cut flowers. Ursula hadn't really the country habit. Nature was too lush and too untidy to appeal to her.

'Jaded?' Val asked suddenly. 'I've my keys on me. I'll run you home by boat.'

'Oh, good!' A warm glow of appreciation came over me. 'Most of the time, you're a comfortable person to be with, Val darling. I wish . . .'

'What?'

I couldn't put it into words. It had just been a stray thought, blown across my mind, light as spray and as nebulous.

CHAPTER XV

Love sought is good, but giv'n unsought is better.

W SHAKESPEARE

'Let me . .

I looked up, startled, as Val took the broom from me. I had been sweeping up the last of the debris from the decorations. I hadn't heard his footsteps in the silent church. I paused, straightening my aching back and pushing my hair out of my eyes.

'I expected you yesterday,' I said flatly.

'Couldn't make it. Besides, today suited Pat better.'

'Patrick? I thought he was coming by train. Ursula has driven in to Treva to meet him. Aunt Beatrice went with her.'

'There are always crowds travelling on Easter Saturday. It seemed safer to bring him back by car. With an arm still in plaster, he would have been at a serious disadvantage in a scrum.'

'Of course. We ought to have thought of that. I'm glad you did,' I said breathlessly. 'Where is he?'

'At home. Relax now, poppet! You'll have plenty of time next week in which to hover round Patrick. While I'm away, working hard . . .'

He was wielding the broom expertly as he spoke. I followed him rebelliously to the porch. He must have known that I was starving for a glimpse of Patrick. He might have stopped here before he had driven on to 'Many Waters'. I said so, sharply. He shrugged his heavy shoulders.

'Blame Pat for that! I was all agog to see you, my love, but he was afraid the church would be full of enthusiastic decorators. He said most ungallantly that he couldn't face

a "pack of gossiping women" and insisted on being taken straight home.'

I smiled reluctantly.

'I suppose they would have embarrassed him with their curiosity and sympathy. He was wise not to stop.'

'He who can do no wrong,' Val said teasingly. 'Ever find excuses for me, Baby?'

'Yes. Of course. Don't be silly!' I said impatiently.

I took the broom from him and put it away in the cupboard in the vestry. He walked slowly up the aisle, and paused, appraising the Easter decorations. The flowers were particularly lovely this year, because Easter was later than usual.

There were tall white lilies on the altar, with lilies of the valley clustered around them. The choir-stalls were a symphony of yellow; primroses, daffodils, and irises, skilfully combined. The pulpit, Ursula's handiwork, was like an exquisite piece of *petit point*, all in white.

'"Spring goeth all in white",' Val quoted, his brows contracting. 'Why the white marble effect of the pulpit? Chaste but chilling . . .'

'Ursula's idea. It's quite a work of art. Look!'

'It makes one uncomfortable. I prefer your efforts on the lectern.'

'How did you know I did the lectern? Usually, I do the font.'

'Your touch is unmistakable. You never diagoon flowers. You handle them as if they were living creatures, and you loved them. They're growing around the lectern. On the pulpit, they're being tortured.'

'Don't! Now you've spoilt Ursula's handiwork for me.'

'Not I. You didn't really admire it. Be honest!'

'Well, there was a certain amount of wrangling over it, and I'm afraid some people's feelings got hurt. Mrs. Catt retired in what she would call "umbrage". It's not like her to take offence at anything Ursula does, but they had quite a sharp exchange for once,' I said ruefully. 'Oh,

dear! I'm hot and tired and dishevelled. Why do you so often catch me at a disadvantage?'

'You don't mind. You say to yourself: "It's only Val." It doesn't dawn on you that I could regard that as a compliment. You're flushing.'

'You make me feel guilty.'

'You needn't. Marriage is a long, long road. Who wants to travel it with a partner who expects "party manners" and "party clothes" all the way? It's a much more encouraging sign that you can be your workaday self with me,' he said seriously. 'And, because I love you with wispy hair, a smudge on your chin, a shining nose, and only a remnant of lipstick, I'm utterly certain that I love *you*—and you alone—now and for ever.'

In the hushed, fragrant church, his words sounded strangely impressive. He put his hand over mine. We were standing at the chancel steps. Suddenly, the significance of our position came home to me. I would have stepped back, but the gentle pressure of his fingers stayed me.

'"In sickness or in health, in poverty or in riches, for better or for worse, to love and to cherish . . ."' he said quietly. '"I hereby plight thee my troth".'

'You've got it all muddled . . .'

'I've the gist of it, haven't I? "To have and to hold", and "Forsaking all others", can be taken for granted,' he answered calmly. 'I have never wanted any other girl.'

'Oh, don't!'

I could cope with him when he was flippant or teasing or exasperating. Not when he was serious. Not when he was speaking to the heart of me. Then, I felt unbearably moved with pity and regret and a kind of frustration.

I didn't want to hurt Val, but why must he ask so much? Why couldn't he be content with my friendship and affection? I looked up at him . . . and I knew intuitively that Ursula was wrong in one respect. Val wasn't just trying to take me away from Patrick, out of envy or malice. Val loved me. He had the quietly determined, dedicated

expression which he would have worn had we been going through the wedding ceremony in actual fact.

'We'll be married here, by Uncle Lawrence,' he said, as if to himself. 'The church will be scented with flowers as it is now—and with mothballs, because the villagers will all turn out in their Sunday best. The kids will line up along the path to deluge us with confetti. The photographers from the local rag will beg "Just a minute, please", and produce a photograph which makes you look ethereally lovely and me like a grinning ape. There'll be so many at the reception—invited or uninvited—that the vicarage will bulge at the seams, and Willie will have to dash back to "Many Waters" for fresh supplies of champagne.'

'Port,' I amended involuntarily. 'Most of the locals prefer port. They rate champagne as only one degree better than fizzy lemonade.'

'Port, then, and really super sandwiches, as well as an enormous wedding-cake, and ice cream for the kids. It'll be a day to remember, Baby!'

'Where do we go from there?' I asked, trying to keep my tone light.

'Does it matter? As long as we're together, anywhere will look pretty good to me. We'll just drive away . . . and stop when you feel like it.'

'Don't,' I said unsteadily. 'It's stupid to make believe. When Patrick and I get married . . .'

'It wouldn't be like that, if you were to marry Pat.'

'So—what? Do you suppose I mind when and where and how?'

'Of course. Any girl would, and you, my poppet, are essentially feminine and romantic. I can visualize you in yards and yards of soft white veiling, over a close-fitting white satin sheath, and a coronet of deliciously scented orange blossom on your dark hair. Gold and white roses for your bouquet . . .'

'Be quiet! You're just trying to tempt me. You know perfectly well that Patrick would hate a lot of flap and fuss and—and orange blossom,' I protested.

He didn't answer me in words. He simply dropped my hand and turned away. I followed him back to the porch, feeling lost and unhappy.

I wanted most desperately to see Patrick; to take comfort from the light in his eyes and the pressure of his lips; to hear him tell me that he loved me and had forgiven me. Why must Val thrust himself between us? I could have screamed at him . . . but I owed him too much.

Who had rescued me from St. Chad's? Who had pulled me out of that icy, rushing water? Who had borne the brunt of the inquest for me? It had been largely due to Val's tact and discretion that the Coroner had returned a verdict of death by misadventure. No suggestion of suicide had even been voiced at the inquest.

Afterwards, I had felt ungratefully resentful of Val's stage managership. It had seemed unfair to Miranda to hush up or gloss over the tragedy. When I had put that to Father, he hadn't agreed. He had reminded me that we had to consider the feelings of Miranda's parents.

So it had been a quiet inquest, and a big, public funeral. Val had sent a magnificent wreath from himself and me, which had been greatly admired if not envied. There had actually been orchids in it, among the lilies and carnations, perhaps the only orchids Miranda had ever been given.

'Life is dreadfully sad,' I said forlornly, closing the heavy oak door behind us. 'People so often don't realize their hearts' desires until it's too late.'

'Hear, hear!' Val said whimsically. 'Remember that, my poppet! When you're lined up in the Registrar's office beside Pat, remember there's still time to cut and run, back to the church and me.'

'Oh, you! "Never say die" is obviously your motto.'

'Obviously.'

He kissed his hand to me and walked away to his big green car. I went slowly home by the door in the wall. I could have invited Val to stay to supper, but Father would prefer to be alone, I knew. Easter Sunday was always a heavy day for him. It would start with Holy Communion

at seven and again at eight. I wished I had asked Val which service he would attend. Probably, the seven o'clock, I thought, because he would be in church again at eleven, to sing in the choir.

Aunt Beatrice, Uncle Willoughby, and Ursula would be there at eight as usual. Would Patrick come with them? Perhaps he wouldn't feel up to it.

I walked into the kitchen, and was surprised to find it deserted. Even stranger, the fire was nearly out, and there were no pots on the stove; no preparations for supper at all.

'Mrs. Catt?' I called, at first tentatively, then quite loudly.

There was no answer. I went through into the hall. The study door was shut. I guessed that Father was behind it, conning over his sermons for tomorrow. I was reluctant to disturb him. In any event, he was unlikely to know where Mrs. Catt had gone. Probably, she had popped down to the village shop for something, and become involved in a spate of gossip.

If she hadn't returned by the time I had laid the table, I could scramble some eggs. Father never cared what he ate, and I had no appetite tonight.

I opened the dining-room door, and was instantly swept away by a dizzy excitement. Patrick was sitting in one of the shabby leather armchairs, smoking. At my startled cry, he tossed the cigarette into the hearth and got up, stiffly, because his right arm was still in plaster.

'Oh, Patrick! Oh, darling!' I said breathlessly.

I would have hugged him, but he shook his head. He stared over my shoulder, to the door.

'Where's old Nanny? No need to set her tongue wagging,' he said quickly.

I turned to close the door. I felt faintly chilled. I knew we had to be careful, but did it matter here, in my own home, what we did or said?

When I came back to Patrick, the moment for a passionate embrace had passed. He bent and kissed me lightly on the forehead.

'It's no use for you to wear that elaborate ring unless you act up to it,' he said, almost defensively. 'You know how old Nanny gossips.'

'Yes.'

I wished he hadn't called her 'old Nanny', as Ursula did. I wished he hadn't used Ursula's pet phrase—'You know'. I hadn't realized in the past how much of him—consciously or unconsciously—was Ursula's.

'It wasn't exactly wise to come here this evening, but I had to talk to you,' he said restlessly. 'Ursula refuses to discuss it, and I couldn't question Aunt Beatrice or Father. They wouldn't have understood why I had to know. Val gave me the bare facts, but he's been away most of the week. He's not up in the village gossip.'

'And you think I am? Well, thanks!' I forced a smile. 'What is it that you're so eager to discuss?'

He stared at me bleakly.

'The inquest, naturally. Or, rather, the repercussions. What are people saying about her death?'

'What people always say in such circumstances. Some of the old women flatly deride the medical evidence. They're still convinced that she was going to have a child.'

'She wasn't, was she? The police surgeon can hardly have been mistaken about that.'

'No. Of course not. It was a great relief to her parents. It cut out their fear that she had drowned herself. They're certain now that she was merely on her way home for the evening and didn't realize how slippery the planks were.'

'You sound sceptical. Why shouldn't it have happened that way?'

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him of the note in Miranda's pocket. Why did I catch back the words? Out of loyalty to Val? Or because I was afraid Patrick would pass the information on to Ursula, who would use it as one more handle against Val?

'Does it matter now?' I asked warily.

'I suppose not. As long as there's no attempt to burden us with the responsibility . . .' He frowned. 'She was

always a pleasant and obliging kid. Somehow, one didn't care to tip her.'

'What do you mean?'

'Instead of the customary tip, I gave her a handbag last Christmas.' Rather foolish of me, perhaps, but it was what she coveted.'

'Oh!' I said faintly. 'Oh! That expensive pigskin bag? You bought it for her? *You?*'

'What's all the fuss about, if I did? She longed for "a real leather bag". It seemed an innocent enough wish to gratify.'

'Yes.'

I was impatient with myself for the pang I couldn't suppress. Why should I resent a kindly impulse? Was I so madly possessive over Patrick that I couldn't bear him to give a housemaid a generous Christmas present? Why this sense of disillusionment? What did it matter, whether Patrick or Val had bought that expensive handbag for Miranda?

'She promised not to tell anyone,' he added, looking suddenly young and uneasy. 'I wonder if she kept her word?'

'I expect so. She wouldn't have wanted to antagonize any of you. She was hoping you would stake her to a trip to London. She was more or less demanding £100.'

'Good heavens! As much as that?'

'You didn't know?'

'Not the exact figure, no. Val was negotiating with her. It was sheer blackmail, of course, but we had to protect Father.'

'And Val.'

'Val? Oh, no! She wasn't interested in Val. She was too shrewd. She saw through Val,' Patrick said, with elder-brotherly patronage. 'Most girls—in their heart—loathe flippancy. Val will never take any girl seriously.'

'Won't he? Not even me?'

'You? My dear, he stuck that absurd ring on your finger entirely on my account. He knows I can't afford

to have my reputation smirched. It doesn't matter what he does with his, luckily for him,' Patrick said tolerantly.

'I see.' I moistened my lips nervously with the tip of my tongue. 'Do you—do you still love me?'

'What a question! Yes. In spite of everything, I love you to distraction,' he said, smiling at me. 'There's a possibility that I may be going to the United States in September, to deliver a course of lectures. We could be married before I left. Then, you could finish your training while I was away.'

'Oh! Couldn't I come with you?'

'Better not. Of course, if my hand doesn't function . . .'

'It will. Oh, Patrick, it must! What does Mr. Manuden say?'

'He's quite confident. I think it will be all right, but I can't be certain just yet.'

I wished he would take me in his arms. There seemed to be a kind of break in the contact between us. When I looked at him, I knew I loved him so much that it hurt. I could feel my love quivering and expanding inside me. Only, it needed actual physical contact to release it. Standing before him, I was stupidly dumb.

'Have you been decorating the church? You're rather messy,' he said suddenly.

'Oh, I know! I'm hot and untidy. I must go and clean up. You'll stay for supper, won't you?'

'Better not. Old Nanny would wonder why. Besides, they're expecting me at home. I slipped away while I was supposed to be resting.'

'Oh!'

I tried to think of some good reason for detaining him, but my brain was numb. He turned towards the door.

Then I heard Father, calling me. The door swung open before I could answer. Father, his white hair madly ruffled, and an open book clutched in one hand, almost fell upon me, waving his faded perforation gauge in the other hand.

'Evelyn, what do you think? That last batch of covers

Val brought me . . ' he burst out incoherently. 'I was just going through them, to refresh myself. I found an envelope from St. Lucia. I was about to soak the stamps off, and then something induced me to check the perforation.'

'You seem very elated about it, Uncle Lawrence,' Patrick said humorously.

'What? Oh, it's you, Patrick! How are you? Better, I hope,' Father said absently, and turned to me again. 'Come and check it with me, my dear! I feel certain that it is $14\frac{1}{2} \times 14$, but it's almost too good to be true. It's a twelve cent, you see. It's valuable.'

'Really? Worth a fortune?' Patrick asked, with a flicker of interest.

'The dealers list it unused at £35. They don't quote it used. Perhaps mine will be the first, if not the only used specimen to come to light. Won't that be thrilling?' Father said happily.

'Oh, Daddy darling, it's wonderful!' I said eagerly.

I scarcely dared to believe it. Often and often, Father fancied that he had unearthed a rare specimen, but nearly always he was mistaken. If he wasn't, it was certain to be damaged and so virtually valueless.

'If only Val were here to check it with us,' Father said regretfully. 'He's been so good in collecting covers for me.'

We followed him back to the study. Scarcely breathing, I bent over the littered desk. Oh, joy! There wasn't any mistake this time.

'It is! It is!' I exclaimed triumphantly. 'It is the twelve cent claret $14\frac{1}{2} \times 14$. Look, Patrick!'

'If it's only worth £30, why all the excitement?' Patrick asked in genuine bewilderment. 'From Uncle Lawrence's gloating, I thought it must be worth thousands.'

Poor Father! His face fell like a hurt child's. Much as I loved Patrick, I could have kicked him. Hadn't he enough imagination to perceive what this find meant to an ardent but impecunious philatelist?

'It's wonderful. It'll be the gem of your West Indies collection,' I said warmly.

'I shall sell it,' Father said decisively. 'If I can get a good offer for it, I shall spend the proceeds on your wedding-gown, my darling.'

'Oh, no!' I protested, not daring to look at Patrick.

'There's always the chance of that particular perforation being repeated. I think we should sell it while it's valuable,' Father said sagely. 'Not at once, of course. I'll keep it till after the next Club Exhibition.'

His eyes lit up again in contemplation of the sensation he would be able to cause. He belonged to a philatelic club which met once a month in our nearest market town. The members were all intensely enthusiastic, and frequently staged exhibitions.

'Yes. Of course,' I said promptly.

Why, oh, *why* must Patrick look so hopelessly bored? 'My darling love, your honesty can be as cutting as your surgeon's knives. Please, please humour Father tonight. This is such a red-letter occasion for him,' I tried to say with my eyes. 'Don't let him see that you think he's being childish.'

If the message reached Patrick, he disregarded it. I sighed inwardly. Father was glancing from one to the other of us, as if sensing something amiss in the atmosphere.

'You're not interested in stamps?' he said disappointedly to Patrick. 'Then, you can't enter into our excitement.'

'No. It seems painfully school-boyish to me. I outgrew that stage years ago,' Patrick answered candidly. 'It must be rather an expensive hobby for you, Uncle Lawrence.'

He didn't say—perhaps he didn't mean to imply—that it was an unsuitably expensive hobby for a country parson, but Father coloured up like a child who had been slapped. He was more sensitive and perceptive than most people realized. He would imagine now that Patrick was suspecting him of misappropriating church funds in order to buy rare stamps.

In a desperate attempt to save the situation, I said with

forced gaiety: 'It's a real occasion for us, anyway. We simply must celebrate it, Daddy. What have we in the cellar?'

'My dear, it's still Lent,' Father reminded me.

'Never mind! It's Easter Day in a few hours' time. I'm sure we shall be forgiven if we have a modest drink apiece now. Let's have the last bottle of that wonderful old port which Uncle Willoughby gave you,' I said firmly. 'We'll fetch it up and let it warm while I get supper. Mrs. Catt appears to have deserted us.'

Father looked at me doubtfully.

Patrick said: 'How can one celebrate anything in port?'

He didn't speak unkindly, just teasingly as if to a child, but Father's colour deepened. Perhaps it hadn't been a very good idea to suggest a celebration, but I was determined to go through with it now. On such frail threads hang destinies. Had Patrick not stung me by deflating Father, I shouldn't have insisted on raiding our almost empty cellars.

The cellars had been constructed in the days when there always was 'brandy for the parson'. They stretched right under the vicarage, and must have been invaluable to by-gone smugglers. They were too dank to be used as a junk room. Often, they remained dusty and unvisited for months on end.

There were three entrances. The one we invariably used was by means of a trap-door and stone steps leading downwards from the larder.

'It'll do you good, Daddy,' I said, sweeping aside his mild protest. 'Besides, you jolly well deserve it. I think it was awfully clever of you to spot that rare perforation. You'll have to write to the papers about it. Luckily, one can see the postmark on that corner of the envelope and so prove the date of posting.'

'Yes. That adds considerably to its interest,' Father said happily.

We left him examining his treasure again through a magnifying glass. I led the way to the larder in silence.

Dusk had fallen, and the old house seemed unnaturally silent. Our footsteps echoed eerily from the stone floor of the twisting passage. I realized that I was listening unconsciously for the clatter of saucepans and china from the kitchen. For such a small person, Mrs. Catt made quite a lot of noise.

We had had electric light installed in the main rooms, but it had seemed an unnecessary expense to have it in the larder, the unused pantries, the storerooms, and the cellars. It was almost dark in the larder now, though, and Patrick drew back from the trap-door with an exasperated gesture.

'Do you want to break your neck on those stone steps? Isn't there any proper lighting? Then, for goodness sake, get a torch,' he said irritably. 'What a child you are, Lyn! I wish you would grow up and be more sensible.'

As always, that note of censure from him made me wither a little, inside me. Didn't he know how devastatingly effective was his power to hurt me?

I had a miserable feeling that he was deploring the childishness and inadequacy of both Father and me. Perhaps I never should measure up to Patrick's standards.

Out of my hurt, I said desperately: 'Do you want me to be "sensible"? Val doesn't. Val likes me the way I am.'

Patrick gave a muffled ejaculation, and grabbed for me with his uninjured hand.

'Don't! Don't dare to hurl Val at me. You belong to me,' he said grimly. 'I shall criticize you if I please, but I shan't give you up to him. Get that quite clear, will you?'

'Oh, darling . . . darling . . . ' I said faintly, as his lips travelled over my face hungrily and possessively. 'I love you so much, but—but you make everything dreadfully difficult . . . '

CHAPTER XVI

*But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near.*

A. MARVELL

'Now let me go,' I said breathlessly, seconds or minutes later. 'Supper won't be ready till midnight, if I don't get busy.'

'I oughtn't to stay.'

'Oh, you must! And you must help Father to celebrate,' I said, emboldened momentarily by the ardour of his kisses. 'It means a lot to him. Do try to sympathize.'

'I can't pretend. You know that. I think it's ridiculous for a man of his years, his profession, and his limited means to waste time and money on insignificant bits of paper.'

'How crushing!' I tried to laugh at him, but uneasiness stirred in me again. 'Do you have to be so uncompromising?'

'Would you prefer me to be hopelessly insincere, like my young brother?'

'No. Val isn't insincere. If he tries to please people, it's because he enjoys pleasing them,' I said defensively.

'Don't tell me that you're impressed by that phoney charm!'

'That sounds like Ursula.'

'Well? Ursula can see through Val, if you can't.'

'Don't! Please don't let's argue about Val and Ursula,' I pleaded. 'One can only speak of people as one finds them, and Val has always been blissfully kind to me.'

I started down the ancient stone steps without waiting for his answer. I heard faint rustles. I jabbed my hand into a nasty, sticky cobweb. Something went 'scrunch—scrunch' under my feet. I wished I had fetched a torch.

It was dark and dank and dismal in the cellars. I reminded myself that I hadn't far to go. Such wines as we possessed were in the first cellar, quite close to the foot of the steps. Would I be able to distinguish the port, though?

'Throw me down your matches, please!' I called up to Patrick.

'Right!'

I was aware of his leaning forward to toss down the matches. I held out my hands to catch them. I just touched the box, but it slid through my fingers. When it landed, it made no sound. That gave me a most horrid shock. I couldn't at first think why. I just went taut, from instinct.

Then, with my senses quickened by fear, I heard the breathing. It wasn't my own. It came from below me.

'What are you doing? What's the matter?' Patrick called down impatiently.

'There's—there's someone here,' I stammered.

'Someone where? What do you mean?'

'Someone. Oh, it must be Mrs. Catt, of course!' I said, my brain beginning to work again. 'Who else? Get a torch, Patrick. There's one on the dresser in the kitchen. Mrs. Catt . . .'

The words were cut off abruptly as I took a step downwards . . . and my feet shot from under me. I sat down hard; very hard. I descended the rest of the stairs most ignominiously, on my back. For a moment, I was winded. Then, as I moved to scramble up again, I touched something that felt like an old bundle of clothes.

I bit back a scream. It was Mrs. Catt. Who else could it be, in our cellar? I wasn't afraid of Mrs. Catt. I needn't get in a panic, because she had apparently fallen down the cellar steps.

'Mrs. Catt!' I called quaveringly. 'Mrs. Catt, are you hurt?'

I was answered by a sudden, loud miaow, and a furry body brushed against my ankles. I jumped . . . but then relief surged through me. Obviously, Mrs. Catt had

decided to visit the cellar for some reason or other and had been tripped up by her ginger tom. There was nothing sinister or alarming about that.

Only . . . I hadn't tripped over the cat. I had slipped on something. What?

'Are you there?' Patrick called, shining a torch down the steps.

'Yes. Yes, of course I'm here. Be careful! The steps are slippery.'

He came down slowly. Even so, he skidded and nearly lost his footing. He stopped short and shone the torch on the offending step.

'It looks like candle-grease,' he said disgustedly. 'Most dangerous . . .'

'Oh! I expect she dropped her candle when the cat tripped her. She—she hasn't moved or spoken, but she's breathing.'

It was difficult to tell from a cursory examination whether Mrs. Catt was only stunned or more seriously injured. She groaned when Patrick ran his hand gently over her, but she didn't answer me when I spoke to her.

'Better get her upstairs,' Patrick said crisply. 'Can you carry her?'

'Yes. I expect so. She isn't much bigger than a child.'

I suppressed an involuntary quiver of revulsion. It was utterly wrong and unchristian to shrink from Mrs. Catt. She had been a devoted Nanny to Ursula, and a faithful cook-housekeeper to Father. She had a weakness for gossip, but so had most of the village women. I had no reason for suspecting her of calculated malice.

I gathered her up in my arms and followed Patrick slowly up the stone steps. We nearly met with disaster on the candle grease. He skidded again and collided with me. I hovered precariously for a second or two, then managed to regain my balance, though I nearly dropped Mrs. Catt in the process.

Fortunately, Father came to see what was delaying us. and was in time to help me up the last few steps. Between

us, we carried Mrs. Catt to the horsehair sofa in the kitchen.

'Just concussion, I think,' Patrick said judicially, when he had made a further examination of her. 'She's bruised, of course, and probably shocked. Better get her to hospital for a few days, if possible.'

'I can look after her,' I said, because I felt bound to volunteer, however distasteful the prospect.

'She would be better in hospital. At her age, there might be complications. I'll try if I can fix it,' Patrick said firmly.

When he had gone to the study to telephone, I did what I could to make Mrs. Catt more comfortable. As I was bathing her forehead, on which ominous discolorations were appearing, she groaned and opened her eyes. She blinked at me without recognition and murmured Ursula's name.

'Lie quiet, Mrs. Catt. You've had a fall,' I said soothingly.

'A fall?' she echoed vaguely.

'Yes. Don't you remember? You were going down the cellar steps and you slipped. Perhaps the cat tripped you.'

'If you don't behave pretty, I'll tell Miss Beatrice of you,' she muttered. 'She won't keep you, if you're a naughty little girl. 'Tisn't as if you was her own.'

My years at St. Chad's had acclimatized me to people's wandering thoughts. Frequently, when they were coming round after an anæsthetic, their minds roamed back into the past. Fever and certain drugs had much the same effect. Evidently, Mrs. Catt was thinking of the days when Ursula and I had been children. Presumably, she was rebuking me.

'I'll be good,' I said pacifically. 'You mustn't worry.'

'Too clever for your own good. Just like your father, if the truth were known,' she said restively. 'Blood will out, more's the pity! I never told a soul and never will, but it's just what you might have expected.'

'Yes. Don't worry,' I said again, perturbed by the

feverish glint in her black eyes, and the restless movements of her head. 'Everything will be all right.'

'There's no call for you to raise your hand against me,' she said shrilly. 'You let me be, or I'll tell Miss Beatrice of you.'

Then she began to moan again and to call for Ursula.

'This is Evelyn,' I said, holding the damp sponge to her bruised forehead. 'Do you want Ursula? Shall I send for her?'

She tried to sit up at that. She seemed to be in a highly agitated state. Perhaps she was reliving her recent bickering with Ursula over the decorations.

Patrick came back, took her pulse, and frowned.

'The sooner she's in hospital, and given a sedative, the better,' he said tersely. 'The ambulance will be here within half an hour.'

'Oh! Oh, you managed to get a bed for her? I didn't suppose there would be one available.'

'I insisted,' Patrick said, reverting to his professional manner. 'We don't know how long she was lying unconscious in that dank cellar. She'll be lucky if she escapes pneumonia. She's running a temperature now.'

'Oh, dear!' I said feebly.

It was right and natural that his primary consideration should be the patient's welfare, of course, but I had foolishly supposed that he had wanted to get her to hospital in order to spare me the burden of nursing her. I could see now, from his grim, concentrated expression, that he wasn't even thinking of me. He wanted to know what drugs I had in the house. He was quite put out that I had nothing stronger than aspirin.

'You could call Dr. Chilton,' I said reluctantly.

'That would merely complicate matters. I would rather get her to hospital. She should have an X-ray. I'm afraid there's some pressure on the skull,' he said, running his long, sensitive fingers over Mrs. Catt's head again. 'And I can't do a thing about it. Could there be a more hellish

kind of frustration? It's a heavy price to pay for a few snatched kisses.'

That was like a sword-thrust right through my heart. I looked at his stern, handsome face and into his clear, steel-cold eyes. I knew that all my love was not enough and never could be enough. Patrick's heart was fixed, but not on me. The skill in his brain and hands was infinitely dearer to him than any one person.

'You think I would have had you run the least risk, just for "a few snatched kisses"?' I said wearily. 'Oh, think again! My love may be quite inadequate, but at least it's not that selfish or demanding brand.'

'You couldn't have foreseen the result, my impetuous Lyn,' he said resignedly. 'The curse of it is this maddening waste of time. There's never any time to waste . . . not in my profession. Already, I've lost out on that valvular operation which I was determined to bring off successfully. Another fellow has done it. Did you read the account?'

'About a man's heart beating for a child's, as well as for himself, while the child's heart was being operated upon, do you mean? Yes. I read something about it,' I said faintly.

'I had hoped to be the first to accomplish that . . . to prove that it could be done.'

'It has been proved. Does it matter by whom?'

'Naturally, it matters tremendously to me. What a childish question!' he said impatiently. 'How many other chances am I fated to miss, before my hand and arm will function again?'

' "But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity", '

I quoted bitterly. 'That's how you see it.'

'How else?'

'Some people think we're in eternity now and it isn't a

desert and there's all the time in the world,' I said confusedly. 'Everlasting life. That means eternity, doesn't it?'

'That's all very well for parsons. I shan't be a surgeon for eternity. One's life as a first-rate surgeon is miserably brief.'

I couldn't confute that. Again, I felt wretchedly guilty, as though I had indeed robbed him of precious days and weeks. I wondered dully if anything would ever convince him that I hadn't. If I could prove my innocence to his satisfaction, it wouldn't rid me of the scar left by his disbelief.

I thought suddenly of Val and his 'Bible oath'. Reluctant tenderness rose in me. Val had known intuitively how bitter it was to distrust or to be distrusted. He had tried to make faith as easy for me as possible. There was a basic, disarmingly child-like simplicity in Val. Perhaps that was the bond between us. Even my own father had seen that I wasn't adult enough for Patrick. Or could it be that Patrick lacked the warm humanity of Val? How much did Patrick care about people as people? Wasn't his chief concern with people as patients; as opportunities for demonstrating his skill?

'What's the matter, Lyn?' he asked, as if aware of my involuntary withdrawal.

'You seem so far away from me, sometimes. Take me in your arms again. Make me feel that we love each other,' I said impetuously.

'This is hardly the time or place for love-making. And let me remind you that it's thanks to your emotional cravings that I've only one serviceable arm.'

There was a very long moment of silence. Then words welled up in me like blood from a mortal wound.

'You needn't have said that. You're cruel. You haven't any mercy . . . any charity . . . in you. "Charity suffereth long and is kind." "Caritas" the word is, but you wouldn't know it.'

'Oh, don't be childish and tiresome!' Patrick said, in a

tired, colourless voice. 'You'll never be any use as a nurse, unless you can learn to control your emotions. Take a leaf out of Ursula's book. When she's on a job, she's as steady as a rock.'

'I know. I'm a wash-out, compared with Ursula. You've made that quite clear. Perhaps you would rather marry her? Then, go right ahead! I'm not stopping you. Why should I? After all, I can always marry Val.'

'Be quiet! You're hysterical,' he said contemptuously. 'Why must you try to provoke me? You know very well that you're in my blood and under my skin. I can't keep on demonstrating it. Naked passion has to be decorously veiled, if one is to observe the decencies.'

My pulses lifted, but only fleetingly. It wasn't 'naked passion' that I wanted, at least, not now. I was crying out to be loved and cherished and comforted; not to be seized and possessed. Couldn't he see the difference?

'Ursula . . .' Mrs. Catt said suddenly, on a shrill, disturbed note. 'You let me be, or I'll tell Miss Beatrice of you and your wicked tricks. Spiteful. That's what you are. Now, don't you smile at me in that innocent way, Evelyn. You've robbed my darling of everything she wanted. It's no wonder she's out to get her own back on you.'

'Her mind's wandering,' Patrick said, bending over her again. 'Now, then, Nanny, just relax! You're in good hands.'

Her voice died away into an incoherent mumble. She looked like a wrinkled little mummy.

'Is she—is she going to die?' I asked unsteadily.

'Not if she gets proper attention. Don't panic!'

'Do you think I ought to ask Ursula to come to her?'

'No. Certainly not. She needs to be kept quiet, not encouraged in emotional scenes. Is that the ambulance?'

'It sounds like it.'

'They've taken their time about getting here. We're quicker off the mark at St. Chad's.'

'Yes'

He had removed himself from me again. I could neither reach nor follow him. Father came in with the ambulance men. I stood silently by while Mrs. Catt was placed on the stretcher. I longed foolishly for Patrick to touch me or at least to smile at me, but his attention was completely concentrated on the patient.

He didn't even speak to me or look at me before he went out to the ambulance, taking charge of the men in his customary, authoritative manner.

The telephone bell pealed as I stood in the porch, gazing after them. I turned mechanically and went to answer it.

'Evie?' It was Ursula's voice. 'Darling, is Patrick there? I left him to rest . . . and he's vanished.'

'Yes. At least, he was here. There's been a horrid accident, Ursula. Mrs. Catt fell down the cellar steps.'

'Did she? Poor old Nanny! She was getting rather doddery, wasn't she? Did you hear her in church, talking to me as if I were still in the nursery?'

Her quick, light voice didn't sound unduly concerned. That was the professional control which Patrick had advised me to emulate, I supposed.

'The ambulance has just taken her away. Patrick has gone with it,' I said flatly.

'Oh, dear! Has he? Why? He'll only exhaust himself,' Ursula said regretfully. 'It isn't as though he can do anything. Who found her?'

'I did.'

'Poor you! That'll mean another inquest. People will begin to hint that you're a Jonah. Two deaths at St. Chad's, and two here . . .'

Her musical laugh reached me clearly. I felt myself recoiling, as if from an electric shock.

'Evie? Are you still there? Don't upset yourself. I was only teasing you,' Ursula said, reverting to her elder-sisterly manner. 'I know you never cared for poor old Nanny, but of course it must have given you a shock. I'm the one who'll miss her. She was so pathetically devoted to me.'

'Hold your horses! She isn't dead yet,' I said, when I could speak.

'Not dead? But—darling—you said she'd fallen down the cellar steps and broken her neck.'

'No. No, I didn't.'

'I heard you.'

'I said she'd fallen down the steps. I didn't say anything about her neck. She's concussed and feverish, but Patrick doesn't think there's anything broken. He had her taken to hospital just as a precaution, to avoid complications.'

'Oh! I see.' There was a slight pause. 'Well, that's grand news, darling. I'm so frightfully relieved. I was afraid that she was dead.'

'I don't know why . . .'

Or did I? My hands were trembling. I dropped the receiver back into place. I didn't want to go on talking to Ursula. I didn't want to listen to her cool, crisp voice or her musical laugh.

Val had told me not to trust anyone . . . to look for enemies everywhere. Had he included Ursula in his 'anyone'?

CHAPTER XVII

*Blest, who can unconcernedly find
Hours, days and years slide soft away
In health of body, peace of mind.*

A. POPE

It was Val who was beside me in the vicarage pew for the eight o'clock service. I had hoped it would be Patrick, but he had followed his father, Aunt Beatrice, and Ursula, to the Elbures' family pew. Although pew rents had been abolished years ago, people still clung to their family pews, from force of habit or from a love of tradition.

At Morning Service, Val would be with the choir, of course, and so would his father. I was glad he had elected to kneel beside me now, but why couldn't it have been Patrick? The ring on my third finger checked that thought. Naturally, Patrick wouldn't do anything as unconventional as to sit with his brother's betrothed. In the eyes of our particular world, I was Val's, not Patrick's.

The sun was shining through the stained-glass windows. The air was cool and fragrant from the masses of flowers. There was a wonderful sense of peace and sanctity and 'unseen witnesses'. The things of this world seemed to dwindle and fall away from us.

I had made my first Communion on an Easter Sunday, five years ago. Now, as on every Easter since then, I experienced the same rapt soaring of the spirit, the same conviction that nothing really mattered except 'the evidence of things not seen'. I knew, as I had known before, the significance of that most beautiful of phrases 'the Peace of God'.

'If only one could keep it . . . if only one wasn't worried and wearied and distracted by the frets and fears of every-

day, what heaven upon earth life would be,' I thought with aching regret. 'One knows it's there, ours for the accepting, and yet one so often forgets . . .'

After the service, we had a brief family gathering in the churchyard, before Uncle Willoughby shepherded his party into the station wagon. I was faintly surprised that Ursula was looking as serene and lovely as ever. I was also relieved. Obviously, her conscience was crystal clear and I had tormented myself with vain suspicions last night.

'Patrick rang up the hospital, and dear old Nanny seems to be going on all right. I shall drive over to see her this afternoon and take her some flowers,' Ursula told me. 'Would you like to come with me?'

'No. I'd rather not. She wouldn't want to see me,' I said bluntly.

'Any message?'

'Just that I hope she'll soon be better and that I'm looking after her cat,' I said tritely. 'If she's well enough to talk about it, ask her what she was doing in the cellar. It's a mystery to us.'

'Surely, it's obvious? She was hunting for that ginger cat. She thinks the world of it. I expect she heard it miaowing and went down after it,' Ursula said matter-of-factly.

'How would the cat get into the cellar?' I objected.

'Don't ask me, darling! Cats go anywhere and everywhere.'

'How did you know that the cat was in the cellar?' Val asked abruptly.

'Evelyn told me. She said Nanny had tripped over the cat.'

Had I said that? I couldn't remember. I was inclined to think that I hadn't mentioned the cat. Perhaps Patrick had.

'Don't look so harassed, darling,' Ursula said gently. 'After all, it was simply poetic justice. Nanny used to shut us into the dark cupboard when we were tiny tots.'

'Not me. She never shut me into a cupboard,' I said blankly.

'She did . . . once . . . but Uncle Lawrence objected. He always stood up to Nanny. Mother was weak with her. Oh, Nanny may pretend to adore me now, but she was cruel to me quite often when I was a toddler!' Ursula retorted, a faint edge to her tone. 'I'm sorry she was hurt, of course, but it was really no more than she deserved.'

'And did Miranda also deserve her unhappy fate?' Val asked quizzically.

'Probably, but you're a better judge of that than I can be. I thought her a lazy, impudent slut. No doubt you knew a more alluring side of her,' Ursula said with acid sweetness. 'You gave her some handsome presents, didn't you?'

'Not to my knowledge,' Val said coolly.

'Her expensive handbag. Can you deny giving that to Miranda?'

'Certainly, I deny it.' In a casual but unmistakably possessive fashion, Val put his arm round my waist. 'This is my lady-love . . . in case you didn't know. I don't buy costly offerings for other girls.'

'Then—then—who?'

Ursula was staring at him as if uncertain whether to believe him or not.

Patrick said impatiently: 'What does it matter now? Come on, dear!'

'Don't wait for me! I'm having breakfast at the vicarage,' Val said easily, as Ursula hesitated. 'I haven't given Evelyn her Easter egg yet.'

He turned me about and walked me towards the door in the wall. I went with him reluctantly. It ought to have been Patrick beside me . . . but Patrick had gone on to the station wagon, after his father and stepmother.

'I don't want an Easter egg,' I said childishly.

'Don't you? Think of the fun it was for me to choose one for you!' Val said persuasively. 'I've never had any-one before to shop for *ad lib*.'

'Oh, nonsense!'

'It's true. Aunt Bee always discouraged my offerings as "extravagance". Ursula was apt to find fault with my taste and make me feel small. Pat detested the whole business of anniversaries and present giving. He still does. He thinks it's a waste of time and money.'

He spoke lightly, but with a sincerity which penetrated my defences. My over-active imagination showed me Val in a flash-back; Val as a sturdy, freckled little boy with a disarming grin, pressing his gifts on people who invariably snubbed him and rejected them. I knew from experience how that kind of rejection could hurt.

'Aunt Beatrice was just the same to me—maddeningly practical,' I said impulsively. 'Once I saved up for weeks and bought her an ornate bottle of perfume. I expect it was pretty awful stuff, but she could have pretended to be pleased with it. Instead, she lectured me for wasting my money and letting a shopkeeper make a fool of me. She took the perfume back to the chemists' and insisted on its being changed for toothpaste and a new toothbrush. I was forced to accompany her, and I cried all night, afterwards.'

'Oh, my poppet!' He squeezed me affectionately. 'Let's make a vow never, never to trample on our children's tender little feelings, however preposterous their presents to us. Let's vow never, never to be clever or sarcastic at their expense. Let's vow always to remember what it feels like to be young and unsure and eager to show one's affection.'

'Like puppies,' I said, nodding. 'Oh, yes! Those are good vows, Val. One shouldn't ever snub a puppy's or a child's spontaneous affection. I'm sure you wouldn't. You've an understanding heart.'

Then, I remembered that he wouldn't be father to my mother. It was Patrick who would father my children . . . if any. Perhaps Patrick wouldn't want to be burdened with a family.

'Cheer up, Baby! You needn't brace your muscles yet.'

'What do you mean?'

'Whenever you think of Pat, you go all tense and determined, like a martyr eyeing the stake.'

'I don't! What ridiculous things you say!' I frowned at him repressively. 'I don't know why you've come home with me. I didn't invite you to breakfast.'

'I invited myself—to cook breakfast for you and Uncle Lawrence.'

He followed me into the kitchen. He seized a plastic apron from the hook behind the door. He tied it round his waist. The ends only just met. He removed his jacket and hung it on the peg. Then, he rolled up his sleeves.

'Scrambled eggs and grilled bacon?' he asked cheerfully.

'Yes. If you like.' He had taken a clean glass-cloth from the line and was deftly fashioning it into a chef's cap. 'You are an idiot!'

'At least, I've made you smile again. Isn't that something to my credit?'

Was there a hint of wistfulness behind his grin? I thought again of the small boy whose puppy-like advances had been calmly and coldly rejected.

'You don't have to try so hard,' I said quickly. 'I mean, you don't have to sell yourself to me. I like you, anyway. I—I'm fond of you. You needn't work at charming me.'

'Thanks, but I don't. I'm never consciously charming. I wouldn't know how to be,' he said quizzically. 'If I ever am, it's my natural, unstudied charm you notice. Can't you get it into your obstinate and enchanting head that I like most people and love you? Why must you confuse my attitude to the human race with Pat's or Ursula's?'

'Do I? Not deliberately.'

'No. It's simply that most of your ideas are coloured or distorted by theirs.'

I didn't refute that. I had an uneasy feeling that it might be true.

Val disappeared into the larder for eggs and bacon. I went upstairs to take off my church-going hat and coat. When I came down again, Val had breakfast well under

way, and Father was telling him all about the St. Lucia twelve cent stamp.

Perhaps Val had been trying to make Ursula or me rise when he had spoken of an Easter egg for me. There was no sign of it now. The only eggs visible were those which he was scrambling so efficiently.

Breakfast was oddly peaceful and pleasant. Val was genuinely delighted by Father's discovery. I couldn't suspect Val of humouring Father just in order to please me. Whenever I saw the two of them together, I realized that they were old, tried friends, and that, to Father, Val was more like a son than an adopted nephew.

It gave me a nice, warm glow to feel that Val really cared about Father and could enter into his interests without pretence or condescension. They were deep in a discussion of the choir and the music for the day, when we finished breakfast; a discussion to which I couldn't contribute anything.

It wasn't until Father had retired to his study for a brief rest before Morning Service, and Val was carrying the used china and cutlery to the sink, that I could claim his undivided attention again.

I blurted out: 'I haven't had my Easter egg yet . . .' and could have kicked myself for my childishness.

Val put the loaded tray down carefully. Then, he turned to me, laughing.

'Oh, Baby! You'll never grow up, will you? You'll always stay as entrancingly young and sweet as you are now.'

The tenderness in his tone made me bite my lip. I should have to grow up—and grow up fast—if I was to match Patrick. Why couldn't it have been Patrick who liked me the way I was?

Val went to the door for his jacket. He put his hand in the inner pocket and brought out a small, tissue-paper wrapped parcel. He offered it to me with a deep bow.

'Clown!' I said affectionately, and responded with an elaborate curtsy.

He took me by the hand, raised me to my feet, and kissed me. Why was it so easy and natural to play the fool with Val? We were like two children, I thought, kissing him back again.

His skin was pleasantly warm and firm, and smoother than it looked. An attractive tang of pine clung to it.

There really was an Easter egg in the parcel; a lovely pastel pink, speckled egg, like an outsized robin's. It was lovely in itself, but its contents made me gasp. In a nest of blush pink cotton-wool nestled a diamond and sapphire brooch in the shape of an 'E'.

'Oh, Val—' I began, and checked myself from adding: 'What extra *agance*.' I said instead. 'How absolutely gorgeous! I shall scarcely dare to wear it.'

'Commend me for my restraint. I would have preferred to make it a "V" and an "E"'. I settled for "E", because it stands for "Evelyn" and "Elbure", and you can go on wearing it whether you marry me or Pat,' he explained.

'Oh! Oh, don't! You make me wonder whether I ought to wear it at all. You know I love Patrick. I've never pretended anything else.'

'You love me, too.'

'Well, yes. Perhaps. In quite a different way. As a friend or a brother,' I conceded. 'Only, that isn't enough.'

'Love by itself never is enough. At least, not what most people think of as "love" . . . a somewhat grasping and selfish and possessive emotion. It needs to be heavily laced with the kind of love St. Paul describes in the famous thirteenth chapter of Corinthians.'

'Yes. "Caritas". I know. Don't you think I have any?'

'You have, my poppet.'

He didn't say: 'Has Pat?' but I fancied I read the question in his eyes.

There was a brief silence between us. Then, he turned back to the sink. He filled the washing-up bowl with hot water and measured out the right amount of liquid detergent.

'You are domesticated,' I said lightly.

'I've had plenty of experience of looking after myself.'

'Yes. I suppose you have. You've moved around quite a lot, haven't you?'

'And not always in hotels.'

Again there was a silence. I went to the sink to dry the cutlery as he washed it. Something strained and uneasy seemed to have come between us. What? The mention of Patrick? But . . . Val knew how I felt about Patrick.

'I wish I could take you back to St. Chad's with me on Tuesday,' Val said abruptly. 'I don't like leaving you here.'

'St. Chad's? Are you going there? Why?'

'To patch up the beech trees. If I had known that Pat and Ursula were coming home . . .' He paused, frowning. 'Is it useless to warn you to be careful?'

'Careful? Of what?'

'Primarily, of Ursula.'

'Ursula?'

The name appeared to hang in the air, as if suspended between us. I moistened my lips with my tongue.

'Ursula?' I said again. 'Val . . . why?'

'Has it never occurred to you that Ursula has a deep-rooted grievance against you?'

'Of course not. She hasn't. How could she have? We've always been like sisters. What possible grievance could she have?'

'I don't know. That's the problem. I can sense it, but I can't put my finger on it,' he answered slowly. 'It might be jealousy, but over what? Not over Pat. That would be too recent. The grievance I mean dates back to your childhood. It's been there ever since I first knew you.'

'Oh, no! You're imagining it. I've always loved Ursula as if she were my elder sister.'

'Has she loved you as a sister? I doubt it. I loathe making unsubstantiated accusations, but you must know, at the back of your mind, that Ursula was responsible for that affair in the belfry.'

'She wasn't. She couldn't have been. She was on night duty.'

'Who else? Only one of the four of us could have phrased those notes so convincingly. Why should you and Pat have denied writing them, if you had written them? I didn't write them . . . so that leaves Ursula.'

'Oh, no! No.'

'Then find me another explanation.'

'I can't. It's a complete mystery,' I said miserably. 'Ursula . . . Ursula wouldn't hurt me or Patrick.'

'Someone did. Someone wrote those notes. Someone lured Miranda to the falls and closed the sluice-gates. Someone shut Mrs. Catt in the cellar. *Who*—if not Ursula?'

'Oh, be quiet! You've never been fair to Ursula or she to you. I don't know what you have against each other, but need I be dragged into it?'

Suddenly, I was furiously angry with him. I was almost ready to believe that he was the treacherous, malicious 'someone' in question.

'You're trying to spoil everything for me,' I accused him hotly. 'You'd have me turn against Patrick and suspect Ursula of the most poisonous behaviour. You've made me wonder if your father did lose his head over Miranda, and you've made me think hard things of Aunt Beatrice, who has been like a mother to me. Next, you'll be trying to convince me that my own father hates me and wants to injure me.'

'I'm sorry. It isn't pleasant to have to destroy anyone's illusions, but it isn't wise or kind to cherish illusions about people. One must see them and accept them as they are. That alters the picture, but it doesn't necessarily spoil it.'

'Oh, go away! I won't listen to you.'

'Because you're afraid to admit that Patrick is less than perfect, or that Ursula can have any genuine reason for resenting you?'

'She hasn't. Stop trying to frighten me!'

I hadn't meant to use the word 'frighten'. It slipped

out before I knew it was on my lips. I discovered to my dismay that I was shivering.

'Why do you have to go to St. Chad's on Tuesday?' I asked crossly. 'Can't you take a few days' holiday?'

'Unless that business is cleared up, it will always be hanging over us. Pat won't forget it—or let you forget it.' 'Well?'

'The answer—the proof—must be somewhere at St. Chad's,' Val said coolly. 'Besides, I'd like to save those fine old trees before it's too late. Shall I give your love to Rosemary and Daphne and the rest of the flower garden?'

'If you see Rosemary . . .' I bit my lower lip savagely. 'She'll be working. You'd better leave her alone . . . or do you want to damage her reputation? You've no idea how strict Matron is.'

Val was swilling out the washing-up bowl. He unfastened the apron and hung it back on the peg. He unrolled his sleeves and put on his jacket. He straightened his tie and smoothed down his fiery hair.

'When you go silent on me, you're even more maddening than when you're deliberately provoking me,' I flared at him. 'All right! Dash off to St. Chad's and have fun, flirting with every pretty nurse who catches your eye. Why should I care? I'm not engaged to you; not properly.'

'You don't have to be jealous, but it's encouraging that you are,' he said mildly. 'Why not come back with me? I dare say I can square Matron.'

'You've interfered enough already.' I swallowed hard. Why was I making an exhibition of myself like this? 'Anyway, you're not going till Tuesday. Tomorrow is a holiday.'

'Not for me. I've promised to drive Bee and Ursula, plus their exhibits, to the Easter Monday Flower Show at Tretavy.'

'Oh, no! Why should you? That's miles away.'

'Neither Bee nor Ursula likes driving the station wagon, but they're afraid their displays would be crushed in Bee's coupé. Willie won't go with them. He loathes shows of

any kind. Pat can't drive, with his arm in plaster. That puts the onus on me.'

'I don't see why you should have to take them.'

'Let's hope Ursula wins a silver cup or a gold medal. Then, I shall feel happier about leaving you in her vicinity.'

'Why?'

'Someone or something must have given her an acute sense of insecurity, when she was a child. She has to be on top all the time, or she's unhappy and, consequently, dangerous.'

'What an extraordinary idea! It was I, not Ursula, who was a motherless child. She lost her father, but Father never made any difference between us.'

'Did Bee?'

'Well, no! Not noticeably. She always tried to be fair, but naturally she cared more for her own daughter than for her niece by marriage.'

'Except that Ursula isn't Bee's daughter.'

'What?' I said blankly.

'Didn't you know? Then, keep it under your hat. Your father knows and so does my father. Ursula herself doesn't.'

'She isn't Aunt Bee's daughter? Then, who is she?'

'The daughter of Bee's only sister. She was orphaned when she was a toddler. Bee and your uncle adopted her,' he said briefly 'I've wondered sometimes if Ursula knew or guessed the facts, but Bee is certain that the secret has been kept from her. In my humble opinion, it was a mistake not to be open about it from the beginning, but it seems that Ursula's father was a not too desirable character.'

'Oh!'

'If Ursula does know that, it would account for a lot. Only, one can't ask her, without giving it away,' he said thoughtfully. 'Of course, Bee is the last person to understand and humour the workings of a sensitive and highly-strung child's mind. She wasn't even worried by Ursula's unnatural smugness and orderliness. Ursula has always

reminded me of a child who was brought up in the strictest kind of orphanage.'

That was a totally new point of view to me. I looked at him in bewilderment.

'I thought Ursula was naturally good. At St. Chad's, she's called "St. Ursula" She was at school, too. She always won the Good Conduct prize and our mistresses doted on her.'

'A sterile kind of comfort, don't you think? Honestly, now, and with no false modesty, admit that you were always the loved and teased and sought after, the envied and admired one of the two of you.'

'Was I? Not admired or envied, but I always had plenty of friends. Ursula says that "everyone loves a clown" She's the one who's admired,' I said confusedly. 'I've never rated a pedestal.'

'Probably, she envies you your ability to clown. I could find a more flattering word for it, but "clown" will do. I'm afraid it was the May Queen ballot which started all this trouble. Ursula was obliged to acknowledge then that you were the loved one.'

'Oh, no! You're building up a horribly false picture of Ursula. She isn't like that at all. Jealous of me? What utter nonsense!' I said indignantly. 'It's you who are jealous . . . jealous of Patrick. Everything you've attributed to Ursula might well be true of you.'

'It might have been . . . but is it?'

I couldn't bring myself to say 'yes', but neither could I accept his monstrous picture of Ursula.

'You don't know her as I do. She's a wonderful nurse. She's utterly tireless and conscientious. She's been a wonderful sister to me, too.'

'Yes, my poppet. I don't doubt it. Ursula, like most of us, can be an angel or a fiend or both. That's what makes human nature such a fascinating study,' he said calmly.

'I'm surprised that you didn't go in for medicine. You might have been a successful psychiatrist.'

'There's nothing I would have liked better. Unfortunately, family finances didn't run to such a prolonged training for both of us. Pat was the elder and more brilliant. It would have broken his heart to have denied him his chance,' Val said practically. 'We talked it over in a family council. It was agreed that Pat should have all the available capital as his share of the estate, and that I should have the place itself as my share.'

'Oh! Was that a fair division?'

'Willie didn't think so, because he regarded "Many Waters" as more of a liability than an asset. So did Pat. I was keen on it, though. I decided to go in for forestry and, eventually, to make enough out of timber to keep the place solvent,' he explained. 'It was a lucky choice. I'm doing pretty well already. Forestry is one of the few jobs which isn't overcrowded. I usually have more commissions than I can tackle.'

'And you like the job?'

'Oh, certainly! You needn't commiserate with me or imagine that I'm suffering from frustration. Trees are less exigent than human beings. I'd rather have trees as patients than humans or animals. Besides, I like making things grow and transforming wildernesses. The pioneer spirit,' he said easily.

Was he as satisfied with his life as he would have me believe? I couldn't be sure. I had thought Ursula was happy and successful and serene on her pedestal. If I was wrong about her, could I ever rely on my judgment again?

CHAPTER XVIII

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not.*

P. B. SHELLEY

The first few days after Easter were peaceful, if a little flat. Father was tired after the exertions of Lent, culminating in Holy Week. He spent even more time than usual in his study, dozing or 'doing' his stamps.

With Mrs. Catt in hospital, I had all the chores on my hands, plus the ginger cat, which had developed an embarrassing habit of following me everywhere, even into the bathroom. He sprang on to the bath ledge, while I was having a hot bath, and descended on me, accidentally, I supposed. Neither of us enjoyed the experience. He got soaked and I got scratched.

I scarcely saw Ursula. She had won two prizes, a first and a second, at the Tretavy Flower Show. That had heightened her interest in floral decorations. She entered for other shows. She also undertook a lecture to the local fellowship on the art. Aunt Beatrice complained humorously that the house was like a florists', with Ursula practising arrangements in every available vase or bowl.

'No moderation,' Uncle Willoughby commented mildly. 'That's the fault of all you young people. You can't do anything in moderation.'

That certainly applied to Patrick. When he wasn't reading medical papers and treatises, he was commandeering me for walks. Not pleasant country rambles, to revel in the wild flowers and the budding foliage, but 'good, brisk walks for exercise', as he described them. They were enlivened by careful and no doubt valuable expositions on operations, past and future. As Ursula had said, I hadn't

a surgically inclined brain. I could neither follow Patrick's descriptions nor appreciate them. I tried to make the correct and appropriate admiring murmurs, but he sometimes paused and eyed me in a dissatisfied fashion.

He didn't criticize me, but I had an uneasy fear that he was mentally comparing my reactions with Ursula's. At such times, I wondered miserably if he could be in love with Ursula without knowing it.

Perhaps it was unwise to voice my misgivings, but one evening I couldn't endure the suspense any longer. We had walked down to the head of the estuary, crossed the bridge, and were returning by the longer road past the Weirside Hotel. The sky, which had been blue all day, suddenly clouded over and a few drops of rain fell.

'Better cross the weir. It'll be quicker,' Patrick said crisply.

'We could shelter at the Weirside. It may only be a shower,' I suggested.

'No. I would rather not. We might meet people who know us.'

That stung me, even though I was aware of the reason for it.

'And I would rather not cross the weir,' I flashed.

'Don't be childish! It's perfectly safe today. The tide's out and there's very little water running. You've crossed by the plank bridge times without number,' he said impatiently.

'Not—not since Miranda . . .'

'Oh, that? Don't be morbid and hysterical. An accident like hers is one chance in a thousand. Ursula and I crossed the weir last Sunday evening. She didn't falter . . .'

There it was again; his subconscious admiration for Ursula. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to follow him across the planks. I didn't look down. I fixed my eye on Val's plantations, high above the lake.

We reached the opposite bank without incident. Then, the rain descended upon us. Neither of us had a mackintosh. We dived under the shelter of the elms, across the

road. Huddling under them, I tried not to gaze at the alders, growing low on the bank by the water's edge; the alders to which I had clung so short a time ago. Should I ever forget what had happened here, below the falls? Was it 'morbid' to remember the horror so vividly?

Patrick seemed to think it 'morbid' . . . and Ursula evidently agreed with him. In how many other matters were they of one mind?

With raindrops splashing my face and dropping down the back of my neck, I was uncomfortable enough to abandon caution.

As once before, I said recklessly: 'You think a lot of Ursula. Are you sure you wouldn't like to marry her?'

Patrick stared at me. Then, he laughed.

'Jealous? Silly child! Ursula is beautiful and clever and capable, but at heart she's the born spinster. There's something chilling and sterile in her personal relations. She'll probably end up as a most efficient and universally respected Matron in a large hospital.'

'Oh!'

'A man doesn't want a brilliant brain in his wife. He wants someone pretty and adoring, with whom he can relax. You fill the bill very nicely, Lyn.'

He put his left arm round me and kissed my damp forehead. I moved closer to him. I ought to have been satisfied, but I was still uneasy.

'Val thinks that Ursula has a deep-seated grievance against me . . . that she would like to hurt me. Do you agree?'

'I haven't thought about it. Ursula always seems very well balanced and contented. Why shouldn't she be? She's really lovely and she's doing good work at St. Chad's.'

'Perhaps that isn't enough for her. Perhaps she wants to be loved . . .'

'Perhaps,' he said indifferently.

'If she had a tricky appendix, or a budding ulcer, you would be interested at once. You don't care about people's

emotions at all, or how their minds work,' I said reproachfully.

'Why should I? That's not my job.'

'Val admitted the other day that he would have liked to be a doctor. He is interested in people as people.'

'Yes. He would have made a splendid G.P., with a surgery perpetually packed with nervous mothers, squealing brats, and doddering old stagers,' Patrick said tolerantly. 'He would have let patients impose upon him disgracefully.'

'It seems hard luck that he didn't get his chance.'

'Mercifully, Father had sound ideas on the privileges due to his first-born. It would have been much tougher on me, if I'd been the disappointed one,' Patrick said candidly. 'I couldn't have settled down to any other job. I'm not adaptable. Val is.'

'You've always been the brilliant one, but Val isn't a fool . . .'

'Oh, no! He's quite clever in his own way. And he has plenty of pertinacity. Don't under-estimate Val. He's a good chap,' Patrick said in an elder-brotherly fashion. 'He's pulling the estate together, much to Father's relief. Father would have hated to have been obliged to sell it.'

'And you wouldn't have minded?'

'Of course not. What is there for me here, in Watersfall? I couldn't bury myself in a village.'

He spoke as if to a child. He was just a little too conscious of his nine years' seniority, I thought . . . but he could be young, too. He was boyishly confused and uncomfortable when he found himself admitting that the course of lectures in America should have been delivered by Mr. Manuden. It had been at Mr. Manuden's suggestion and urging that Patrick had been invited to substitute for him. It appeared that for family reasons Mr. Manuden was unable or unwilling to make the trip across the Atlantic.

'And, of course, he regards me as his prize pupil, although, between ourselves, I've already gone further than he ever will,' Patrick explained.

That led him into another dissertation on the latest

developments in surgery. He scarcely noticed it, when the shower ended and the sun came out again.

I cried out impulsively: 'Oh, look at that heavenly rainbow!'

He frowned at the interruption.

'What? Oh, yes! Pretty,' he said absently . . . and went on with his exposition.

It was wonderful to be as single-minded as he was. It was a tremendous asset to any man. It might be less of an asset to his wife, unless she could enter whole-heartedly into his obsession. I thanked my stars that I had decided to train as a nurse. I could at least follow and appreciate to some small extent his brilliant work.

We walked back to the vicarage and found Val's green car in the drive. Patrick raised his brows.

'How that fellow gets around! I thought he wasn't due home till Saturday. It's only Thursday today.'

I had a much greater surprise waiting for me indoors. Val was mixing drinks for himself, Father, and Daphne Allen. Daphne of all people! I was so taken aback that I could hardly greet her with any pretence of cordiality.

She didn't appear any more pleased to see me. She flushed and tossed her curls and pouted.

'All this fuss,' she said, glancing uneasily from Val to Patrick. 'Honestly, Mr. Elbure, I hadn't a clue. If I'd guessed it was you, I wouldn't have raised a finger. No one would.'

Patrick was staring at her as if he hadn't any idea who she was. I reminded him hurriedly.

'Oh, of course!' he said, not looking any the wiser. 'Spending a vacation in this part of the world?'

'No. We're here on business. Daphne has something rather important to tell you,' Val said, turning to me.

'It's only that I followed you from the hostel that night,' Daphne said with patent reluctance. 'And—and I locked the door. I didn't guess that Mr. Elbure was in the tower with you. Nor did Ursula. She was frantically worried about you.'

'Worried? About me?' I said amazedly. 'Why?'

'She knew you were in the habit of slipping out late at night, to meet a man, but she didn't know who it was. She was afraid you were mixed up with some ghastly tough.' Daphne gave a nervous, self-conscious giggle. 'Oh, Mr. Elbure, will you ever forgive me? How could I guess?'

'This is most enlightening. Go on, please!' Patrick said grimly.

'There isn't much else to say. I mean, I volunteered to follow Evelyn just to set Ursula's mind at rest. I was going to let her out of the tower after she'd had a good fright.'

'Were you? Thanks for nothing!' I said angrily. 'You little sneak!'

'Well, it didn't seem fair that you should be the May Queen, if you really were behaving so badly,' Daphne said defensively. 'Ursula had been canvassing for me, and she thought there ought to be a fresh ballot.'

'Ursula . . .' I said—and then the significance of Daphne's confession came home to me. 'Ursula told you . . .'

I couldn't go on . . . I *couldn't*. Val was looking at me compassionately. He might have been grinning in an 'I told you so!' fashion, but he wasn't. He knew what a savage blow this was to me.

Patrick's expression was one of grim distaste. He stared from Daphne to me, his grey eyes bleak.

'Who was the man? You certainly weren't slipping out at night to meet *me*. You little idiot! Was that what you wanted to consult me about, when you got me to the tower?' he demanded. 'Then, why weren't you frank with me?'

I flinched away from the accusation in his eyes and from the malicious speculation in Daphne's. I moved closer to Val. He put out one hand and took both mine into a warm, comforting grip.

'There wasn't any man. You don't have to tell me,' he said quietly. 'You shouldn't have to tell Pat.'

'What do you mean? You heard what—er—Nurse Allen

said.' Patrick frowned. 'Ursula had discovered that Lyn was meeting some man . . .'

'Ursula hadn't discovered anything of the kind. Wake up, Pat!' Val said crisply. 'Don't you know Evelyn at all? Don't you know Ursula?'

'Nurse Allen——' Patrick began ominously.

'Daphne is—I won't say an innocent victim—but certainly a victim of a more subtle mind,' Val said coolly. 'Towards Ursula, at least, Daphne acted in all good faith. Ursula had played most skilfully on Daphne's friendship for herself and jealousy of Evelyn.'

'Jealousy?' Daphne pouted again. 'Don't be horrid! I wasn't jealous of Evelyn.'

'Of course you were. Why not? It was quite natural. Isn't she the loveliest, most popular, and most unselfish of the lot of you?' Val said firmly. 'Wasn't she the obvious choice for May Queen? I may be prejudiced, I grant you, but Rosemary heartily endorses my verdict.'

'Rosemary?' I said faintly. 'Is she in this, too?'

'Only in so far as she helped me to corner Daphne. She was disappointed not to be in at the finish, but she couldn't get leave today, and it seemed inadvisable to wait,' Val said significantly. 'For Ursula's sake, as well as Evelyn's.'

'Ursula is devoted to Evelyn. It was natural that she should be worried about her,' Daphne said quickly. 'I really don't know why I had to be dragged all this way . . .'

Her voice trailed off, as if she were uneasily aware of a tension which she didn't understand. Patrick seemed to be sharing her perplexity. Both of them stared expectantly at Val.

He said evenly: 'I had my reasons. I'll take you back again now.'

'You must have supper first,' I said, wondering distractedly how I could concoct an adequate meal from the contents of the larder. 'Do you have to get back to St. Chad's tonight?'

'Afraid so. Don't worry. We can stop for dinner *en route*,' Val said reassuringly.

I knew he was trying to save me trouble, but it irritated me to think of him standing Daphne a slap-up dinner in some expensive hotel or road-house. I felt that my smile must be painfully strained when I invited Daphne to come upstairs for a brush-up before they started. I suspected that she accepted chiefly from curiosity.

Her disparaging, feline gaze silently belittled our old-fashioned bathroom and my far from luxurious bedroom.

'What a quaint place this Watersfall is!' she said, as she sat down before my dressing-table and proceeded to shake powder all over it from her silver flapjack. 'It's incredible that it should have produced the Elbures. They're quite something . . .'

'It's gratifying that you should think so.'

She made a face at me in the mirror.

'Oh, don't try to high hat me Shelley! I'm not the only nurse who's cracked about Patrick Elbure, as you very well know. He's devastatingly handsome, and those grey eyes of his can give one shivers all up one's spine. I wish I had been locked in the tower all night with him. I wouldn't have let him jump off the roof to escape me . . .'

'You——' I clenched my hands together, struggling to control my rising temper. Nothing could be gained by letting Daphne Allen provoke me. 'You know it wasn't like that. We were lured there by a stupid hoax.'

'That's your story.' She giggled irritatingly. Obviously, it was the other one you were expecting—and Patrick Elbure gate-crashed your lovers' meeting. Don't glower at me! I'm not blaming you. A girl has to take what she can get, and Val Elbure's quite a lad.'

'Really?'

'Well, look at your ring and that car of his! Plenty of money there, unless I was born yesterday. And an amusing character, too. A bit of the caveman behind his charm, wouldn't you say?'

I could have wished that Val would try a little caveman stuff on Daphne . . . with the end of a rope or a stout stick.

She was the kind of girl, though, who would squeal delightedly if a man got rough with her.

She was silent while she outlined her petulantly curved lips with a vivid, pillar-box red lipstick. Presumably, that was meant to captivate Val.

As if she had read my thoughts, she giggled again.

'You are mad at me, aren't you? I don't see why. You could have waited for me to unlock the door. You needn't have made all that commotion with the bells. I did unlock it before Sister got there . . .'

'Thanks for nothing!' I said again. 'Wouldn't it have been simpler to have told me that you were yearning to be May Queen?'

'You can cut out the sarcasm.' Her cheeks suddenly flamed. 'I wouldn't have minded if it had been Ursula. She deserved it.'

It was my turn to be silent. So Val hadn't told Daphne who had forged those notes? He hadn't tried to shake her loyalty to Ursula?

I was grateful to him for that. Ursula's treachery was something between her and me . . . aimed at me and to be borne by me. It wouldn't help to make it common knowledge.

'Actually, we had a fresh ballot and your precious Rosemary won it. No one can think why,' Daphne said resentfully. 'A fine picture she'll make in robes and crown!'

'Oh, good! That's wonderful news,' I said in eager relief. 'Rosemary will be a grand Queen.'

Daphne shrugged her shoulders pettishly, and professed herself ready to start on the return drive.

'I wonder just how devoted your Val is?' she said provocatively. 'With that fiery hair, he ought to be hot stuff. You know, I rather go for red-heads.'

'Go for him with bared teeth, if it amuses you,' I snapped.

'You know . . .'

She, too, had caught the phrase from Ursula.

'Oh, Ursula, *why?* Why did you turn on me to rend

me? I loved you as a sister. I've loved you ever since I can remember . . .' I thought, in dull, helpless misery. 'What have I done? What is this grievance which Val suspects?'

It gave me a queer, unnerving feeling to find Ursula herself in the porch with Val, when Daphne and I reached the hall. Ursula must have walked down from 'Many Waters'. She was wearing her white plastic mackintosh and her white rubber boots. She looked as cool and serene and lovely as ever. She greeted Daphne graciously. Evidently, Val had warned her that Daphne was here. He must have told her why, but Ursula's poise was entirely unruffled. She expressed her regret that Daphne's visit had to be so brief, and teased her lightly about her 'uncomfortable conscience'.

'Oh, it wasn't like that! I still think we did the right thing,' Daphne retorted, with a barbed glance at me. 'Some people would have reported Shelley to Matron. We didn't do that. I only came down here to own up to Mr. Elbure, because his brother made such a point of it.'

Ursula put an arm round her and walked with her to the car. I didn't follow them. I gave Daphne a perfunctory wave and turned back into the hall. Let Ursula retain her ascendancy over Daphne's horrid, feline little mind, if she could. It was nothing to me, either way. My ache of loss and betrayal could be neither lightened nor intensified. It was just there. It had moved in on me as irrevocably as if Ursula had died.

CHAPTER XIX

*Leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge.*

W. SHAKESPEARE

Father and Patrick were still in the study. Patrick was saying impatiently: 'I can't follow your reasoning at all, Uncle Lawrence. If Evelyn was meeting Val surreptitiously and Ursula knew about it . . .'

'For a clever fellow, you can be singularly obtuse,' Father said mildly. 'There were never any surreptitious meetings. Ursula forged those two notes, as Val guessed in the beginning.'

'Ursula forged them? Good heavens! Why should Ursula play such a malicious trick on us?' Patrick demanded incredulously. 'It seems to me that you are accusing her on singularly flimsy grounds.'

I loved him for his loyalty even while I regretted his lack of perception. I could have wished that it had been he, not Val, who had unravelled the mystery.

'Not flimsy grounds,' Val said, behind me.

I started slightly. I hadn't realized that he had followed me. He closed the study door and stood there with his back to it.

'Don't be too upset about Ursula,' he said, looking from me to Patrick. 'She's had the knack of imitating handwriting for years. It's nothing new. I suspected it, long ago, and Uncle Lawrence did, too. Under pressure, Mrs. Catt confirmed it. I went to see her in hospital and taxed her with conniving at it.'

'You've been busy,' Patrick said curtly.

'I had to clear Evelyn, hadn't I?' Val retorted. 'It appears that, in her childhood, Ursula used to imitate Bee's

or Mrs. Catt's writing on grocery lists, in order to add items which appealed to her.'

'Oh, goodness! Did she?' I said weakly.

That brought back memories of mild scenes between Aunt Beatrice and Mrs. Catt over various 'extras' from the grocer's.

'Yes. Mrs. Catt apparently shielded her, but used her knowledge to levy a kind of emotional blackmail—the "you do as I say, or I'll tell your ma of you" kind. Not good at all for anyone of Ursula's temperament,' Val said compassionately. 'Just when she most needed to feel secure, she was at the mercy of an ignorant, affection demanding old woman, who alternately threatened and indulged her.'

Ursula must have been listening in the passage. She flung open the door so imperiously that Val had to step hastily aside. Her entrance was effective if theatrical. She flung the white hood back from her smooth, shining hair and advanced upon Val, her colour high but her lips curved into an approving smile.

'You're quite right for once, Val. Old Nanny treated me abominably. She encroached and encroached. Even as a child, I shrank from her moist kisses and rough, grasping little paws, but she was always wanting to kiss and fondle me and I dared not refuse,' she said calmly. 'You can't wonder at my resentment of Evie, can you? She was the lucky one. She had everything. Even when your father married Mother and I went to live at "Many Waters", you Elbures all preferred Evie.'

'I think that was largely imagination, Ursula, my dear,' Father said quietly. 'There was no favouritism shown between you and Evelyn, either here or at "Many Waters". Beatrice and Willoughby and I made a point of that.'

'You tried to be fair, Uncle Lawrence. You were always good to me . . . but how could any man understand a child's mind? Mother was the one most to blame. She never really cared about me. She hadn't any maternal instincts.

She let me feel that I wasn't her child, long before I knew it '

'I suppose Mrs. Catt told you? Your mother—er—Beatrice didn't wish you to know,' Father said gently. 'You were legally adopted . . . legally hers.'

'And who was I really? The child of parents whose one idea was to get rid of me—to have me adopted.' There was an unfamiliar note of passion in Ursula's tone. 'Naturally, I hated Evie, whose parents had loved and wanted her.'

'My dear, your parents loved and wanted you,' Father said in surprise. 'Didn't Mrs. Catt tell you about them? Your mother was Beatrice's younger sister.'

Ursula's eyes widened. She looked at Father in amazement.

'I thought—I thought I'd been adopted from a charity society. I didn't know I was really related to Mother. I'm her niece? Just as Evie is?'

'More so. Evelyn is only her niece by marriage,' Father assured her. 'Dear me! What a pity you weren't told the facts, years ago!'

'A great pity,' Val said wryly. 'So long! I must get cracking before my passenger begins to fume. See you on Saturday, Baby!'

'Yes.' I followed him into the hall. 'Val, I haven't thanked you yet. I'm still half stunned. Ursula . . .'

'She may be all right now that the poison is released. It must have been festering in her for a very long time. It was incredibly stupid of us all not to see it,' he said regretfully. 'I could throttle "dear old Nanny"'. I'm mcrely surprised by the moderation Ursula showed, when she turned on her at last.'

'Did she? Val . . .'

I clutched at his sleeve. 'You—you don't think Ursula pushed Mrs. Catt down the steps, do you?'

'Certainly not. Hasn't it occurred to you that Ursula loathes touching anyone? Quite literally, I mean. She

can only endure personal contacts when she's armoured by her nurse's uniform, and dealing with a patient.'

'Oh! I hadn't thought of it before, but you're right, of course,' I said, in profound relief.

'I suspect that Ursula enticed the cat into the cellar. Perhaps she shut the door when Mrs. Catt was half-way down the steps, calling to her pet. That would seem to Ursula a fitting riposte for past punishments,' Val said consideringly. 'Ursula likes to make things happen, but she isn't capable of any actual violence. I don't doubt that she closed the sluice gates, but she wouldn't have shoved Miranda off the planks. Probably, she merely wanted the girl to spoil her ridiculous shoes.'

'But . . . but . . . how petty! I mean, so dreadfully petty to result in a tragedy . . .'

'My poppet, that is the way things happen. A carelessly discarded match can start a fire which will devastate a vast forest,' he said patiently. 'Miranda might only have had a fright and ruined her shoes and stockings. Mrs. Catt might easily have broken her neck.'

'If——'

'It's always dangerous to play the *deus ex machina*. We should have recognized that tendency in Ursula years ago and treated her for it.'

'Years ago, you were a child, too. And you had more reason to be jealous of Patrick than Ursula had to be jealous of me. Yet you didn't take it out on people . . .'

'I got by all right,' he said easily. 'Take care of yourself, Baby! I must go. I can't let that tiresome girl starve.'

He gave my shoulder a quick squeeze. Then, he was striding out to the car and Daphne. I saw her turn to him with a petulant gesture, as if reproaching him for having kept her waiting. He made a laughing response. It would take more than Daphne's peevishness to shake Val's good humour. He would have her smiling again by the time they stopped for dinner.

'Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good . . .' was one of Father's favourite texts. Was it a

favourite with Val, too? Was that Val's *modus operandi*?

Val was thorough in all he did. He was the kind of person who would apply a great truth to a very small job. He would set about combating a girl's ill-humour in the same spirit that he had tried to clear my name and Patrick's.

The big green car swung out into the lane, and I was conscious of a deep depression, as though I had been robbed of the only medicine which could assuage my aches and pains. I didn't want to have to face Ursula again just yet, but it seemed cowardly to hide away from her. Besides, she hadn't admitted to writing the note to Miranda. I didn't see why Val should be saddled with that.

'It's no use losing your temper with me for a harmless little practical joke,' Ursula was protesting, when I re-entered the study. 'Even Matron couldn't call it a crime. You didn't have to respond to the note. It was your own foolish passions which led you into disaster.'

'Good heavens!' Patrick's lips were thin, taut, and pale with anger. 'Are you expecting to get away with that? I shall make it my business to see that you're dismissed in disgrace—and Nurse Allen with you.'

'You can't. I haven't broken any rules. I wasn't in the tower at midnight with a man. I was on duty,' Ursula said virtuously. 'You can't prove I wrote those notes, either. If you try to make trouble for me, I shall tell Matron a few facts about you.'

'About me? What do you mean?' Patrick demanded.

'About you and that wretched slut of a housemaid. Oh, you can deny it all you please, but I know you were the one! You bought her that expensive handbag. You took her to London for the weekend and gave her a taste for the bright lights. If—if there had been any complications, you would have been responsible,' Ursula said distastefully.

'Be quiet! How dare you tell such lies?'

'Lies or not, they wouldn't sound very well at St. Chad's, would they? You'd better leave me alone, Patrick,' Ursula

said warningly. 'People who injure me have cause to regret it.'

'What did Miranda do to you, that you had to forge that note and—and close the sluice-gates?' I asked desperately.

'She was trying to sink her claws into Patrick. I was planning to divert her to Val. I meant to get you down there, to find her waiting impatiently on the bank for Val,' Ursula explained composedly. 'When I saw how high the water was, I had a brain-wave. I managed to close the sluice-gates. I thought that would teach the little minx not to dress herself up in nylons and high-heeled sandals. How was I to guess that she would be stupid enough to tumble into the water?'

'Did—did you see her fall?' I faltered.

'Of course not. I didn't linger. I didn't want to be involved with her. I just wanted to fice Patrick from her. Only, it wasn't any use. I couldn't feel the same towards him again,' Ursula said regretfully. 'How could I bear him to kiss me, when I knew that he had kissed Miranda first? A housemaid! Even Val has better taste than that.'

'Look here, Ursula . . .' Patrick began furiously, but Father held up his hand to check him.

'Recriminations are useless and hurtful. You've acted very wrongly, Ursula. So, it would appear, has Patrick. Instead of abusing each other, you would do well to make what atonement you can.'

That silenced them both. From glowering at each other, they turned to glower at Father.

'You, Ursula, my dear,' he went on quietly but authoritatively. 'If you were responsible, directly or indirectly, for Mrs. Catt's accident, you can try to make amends for it by nursing her back to health. She will be out of hospital next week. You can have her at "Many Waters", and look after her while you re at home.'

'Why should I? She was hateful to me. She used to tell me that, if I wasn't a good little girl, "Miss Beatrice" would send me back to the orphanage where she got me. Do you expect me to forgive and forget that?'

'One must try to forgive, as one hopes to be forgiven,' Father said firmly. 'Mrs. Catt is a foolish, ignorant woman, quite unfit to be a Nanny, but she was genuine, if unwise, in her affection for you. Moreover, in looking after her now, you'll be taking her off Evelyn's hands. You owe Evelyn considerable amends, don't you?'

'I don't think so. I've made up for everything by handing Patrick over to her. It's Patrick she loves, not Val. I was determined to part them,' Ursula said meditatively. 'I meant to marry Patrick. Then, when I came home and heard the details of the housemaid affair, I knew I couldn't. Let Evelyn have him! I'll find someone better.'

'Well, thanks——' Patrick exploded. 'You——'

'Don't!' I interposed quickly. All my old affection for Ursula was tugging at me now, compelling me to feel a reluctant compassion for her. Suddenly, Val's words came back to me; the words he had quoted to his father on the sunny hillside: 'Leave her to Heaven.'

She turned and smiled at me; her old, elder-sisterly, patronizing smile.

'I knew you would understand, Evie darling. I only hope that Patrick won't fail you, as I feel he has failed me. In a way, you're lucky not to be as fastidious as I am . . .'

She still looked incredibly sweet and lovely and serene, but only as a statue might look. Outwardly she had so much, but she was all hollow within, I thought miserably. Her whole capacity for emotion had been turned inwards on herself until it had shrunk to a small, hard core. Would it ever soften and expand again? Would she forget and forgive past grievances? Would she learn to gaze ahead, not back? Would she meet a man who would understand her and yet love her? Would she one day blossom beneath the love she had missed in her unsatisfactory childhood?

Or would she withdraw more and more from personal relationships? Would she become increasingly the fastidious spinster, the capable Sister, and the born organizer? Oh, no! Heaven must save her from that.

There were maternal tendencies in her. Hadn't she shown them towards me in our childhood? Power alone would leave her heart empty. She needed to love and to be loved.

When, calm and unruffled, she had taken her leave of us, my eyes were misty with tears of helpless pity and regret. I knew now why Val had said: 'Leave her to Heaven.' I knew that he had been speaking of Ursula, not of me, when he had said that Patrick mustn't be allowed to marry her.

'Is she crazy?' Patrick exploded, when the door had closed gently behind her. 'Talking as if I were her property, to be discarded at will, and forging notes at random! What's got into her?'

Father and I exchanged glances. We both realized that Ursula wasn't a subject for surgery, and therefore the complicated twists and turns in her mind would have to remain a mystery to Patrick.

'Poor child! I'm afraid we're all much to blame--Beatrice and Mrs. Catt and myself,' Father said deprecatingly. 'She was such a lovely child, with such delightful manners. We didn't guess at her inward sense of insecurity and inferiority. What damage can be wrought by ignorance!'

'Val thinks she'll be all right now,' I said, clinging to that, as I had clung to his arm. 'The poison came to a head when I was elected May Queen. Now, it may drain harmlessly away.'

Harmlessly? The word knocked me. The harm had been done—to others if not to Ursula herself. Nothing could ever be again as it had been before that ordeal in the belfry. We had all been affected by it, directly or indirectly. Never again should I see those I loved through rose-tinted veils of illusion. Even Patrick was no longer a god to me. I couldn't forget his lack of faith.

'Lyn——' He looked at me concernedly. 'You—you don't believe those wild tales of Ursula's, do you? I did once give Miranda a lift to London, but that was all there

was to it. I was attending a conference. I scarcely saw her . . .'

'You fixed her up with a room at your hotel, and then left her to amuse herself?'

'Is that so odd?'

'Not from you. It's just what you would do. How could Miranda hope to compete with the absorbing interest of a medical conference?' I said wearily. 'I wonder what she did, all on her own in London? We shall never know now.'

'It's of no importance.'

'Perhaps not. What is important?' I asked from a confused and aching heart. 'I don't know.'

'That's something you'll have to find out for yourself, my child,' Father said compassionately.

CHAPTER XX

I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.

A. MEYNELI

I missed the May Day ceremonies at St. Chad's. Much as I would have liked to see Rosemary crowned, I couldn't leave home. I had to nurse Father. He was laid up for several weeks with gastro enteritis. Even when he was up and about again, I had to stay on to see to the chores.

Mrs. Catt had decided to retire and settle down with a married daughter. I wasn't sorry that Watersfall would be rid of her, with her distorted affections and malice, but it left the vicarage stranded. After much advertising and answering other people's advertisements, I got in touch with a middle-aged widow, who was ready to come to us as a cook-housekeeper. She was a large, plump, cheerful person, rather irritatingly parrulous but obviously kindly.

It was on a Sunday evening in June that I handed the vicarage and Father over to her tender mercies, and went out to join Patrick, who was sounding an impatient tattoo on his horn. He stowed my suitcases away in the boot with his. It gave me a warm little thrill to see them there together.

'Look! It's just as if we were married,' I said eagerly.

'Well, so we shall be, pretty soon.' He closed the boot and took me by the arm. 'Come on! If you really have to stop to say good-bye to the family, we've no time to waste.'

'Of course, I must say good-bye. Aunt Beatrice would be hurt if I didn't. And Val . . .' I hesitated, twisting my sparkling ring uneasily. 'I shall have to give this back to Val.'

'Yes. It wasn't a good idea, in the first place. If I

hadn't been too het-up to think clearly, I should have realized that it would have caused less of a furore to announce your engagement to me,' Patrick said ruefully. 'Now, you'll have some awkward questions to answer.'

'I dare say I shall survive them.'

Aunt Beatrice was just getting ready for church. She kissed me absently and said: 'Good-bye, dear! I hope you'll have a nice time.'

'Good-bye, Aunt Beatrice! Keep an eye on Father for me, won't you?'

'I'll try. I expect Val will be in and out of the vicarage as usual. He'll tell us if anything goes wrong.'

'Yes. Any message for Ursula?'

'Oh, just my love!'

She frowned slightly. She still hadn't perceived the real reason for what she called 'Ursula's extraordinary and childish behaviour'. She was disposed to attribute it to Ursula's jealousy of my engagement. That she herself could have been at fault in her bringing up of Ursula, Aunt Beatrice flatly refused to admit. She and Ursula were alike in that respect. Both had to be right all the time.

I said good bye to Uncle Willoughby, who patted my shoulder affectionately and begged me to come home again soon.

'Don't keep the boys dangling! Settle for one of them and marry him soon,' he said teasingly. 'It's high time I had a daughter-in-law and a grandchild or two.'

'Yes. It won't be long now,' I said hurriedly.

Patrick, in the drive, was playing a tattoo on the horn again. I braced myself and went in search of Val.

I found him in his bedroom, packing. It was a big, plainly furnished but exceedingly comfortable room. The furniture was large and solid and good. There was a writing desk by the windows and handsome leather arm-chairs. When he was at home, Val used the room as a sitting-room as well as a bedroom. From the windows there was a magnificent view across the lake.

Val was on his knees, fastening a suitcase. He snapped the locks to and got up slowly.

'I—I'm off now,' I said uneasily. 'Patrick's waiting for me. I just came to say good-bye. And—and to give you this . . .'

I held out the beautiful ring to him, but he waved it aside.

'Hang on to it, Baby! Call it a keepsake. You can wear it on your right hand,' he said affably. 'You won't mind being reminded of me sometimes, will you?'

'Oh, no! No, of course not. You've been marvellous, Val. Thank you for everything,' I said impetuously. 'I wish I could make it up to you, but—but it has to be Patrick. I've loved him for such a very long time. You do understand, don't you?'

'Yes. Don't worry, my love! Just be happy.'

He was smiling at me and suddenly a lump rose in my throat. I owed him so much, and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't marry both of them, and, where Patrick led, I had to follow.

'Are you going away tonight.' I asked at random.

'Yes. For a few days. To an estate near Exeter. You can always reach me if you want me, by leaving a telephone message here,' he said evenly. 'Don't worry about Uncle Lawrence! I shall keep in close touch with him.'

'I know you will. You've been awfully good to him.'

I thought of the hours he had devoted to Father, when Father had been laid up in bed, the errands he had run for both of us, the difficulties he had smoothed out, and the books, papers, and stamps he had produced to relieve the tedium of Father's convalescence.

'Oh, dear!' I said inadequately. 'You've been so kind and—and I hate saying good-bye. Are you furious with me? Do you feel as though I've treated you badly?'

'Now stop tormenting yourself! Everything will be all right,' he said, taking me by my shoulders and propelling me to the door. 'Don't start off on the wrong foot by

keeping Pat waiting. If you're going with him, go'

'I am. I must. You do see that, don't you?'

Perhaps that was expecting too much of him. He gave me a twisted grin and pushed me gently out into the passage.

'So long. Be happy, my love,' he said rapidly.

Then, he retreated into his bedroom and closed the door between us.

I ran downstairs, blinking miserably. Patrick greeted me with a grimace.

'Heavens, how you females revel in prolonging the agony! Anyone would think you were departing for Central Africa and wouldn't be home again for five years'

I scrambled in beside him, forcing a smile.

'I—I feel so guilty about Val.'

'Rubbish! We couldn't both win, could we? He'll have to cut his losses and find himself another girl,' Patrick said in an elder brotherly fashion. 'Can't you fix him up with one of your girl friends at St. Chad's? How about the new May Queen?'

'Rosemary? She's a grand person and she obviously likes Val, but . . . oh, I don't know!' I wriggled restlessly in the comfortable seat. 'Val's more particular than people imagine'

'Oh, forget him! He can take care of himself'

'He asked me to keep his ring. Ought I to accept it?'

'Why not? He can afford to give handsome presents. He's doing very nicely.'

'You don't mind, then?'

'My precious Lyn, you're not expecting me to be jealous of my young brother, are you?'

'Well, no!'

He was driving very fast now, with the concentrated expression which I both admired and feared. It always seemed to put him out of my reach.

I leaned back and tried to relax. It was wonderful to see him with both hands on the wheel. His right arm was still a little stiff, but that would pass off, with massage.

the scars still showed on his fingers, but the fingers themselves were as supple as ever

'Whenever we say the General Thanksgiving in church, I think of you and your right hand Patrick' I said impulsively

'How deliciously feminine'

Why?

'Having first been responsible for the near disaster you then praise God for averting it

Why not? Isn't it like that time and again Aren't we frequently saved from the results of our own stupidity Only, please remember that I *didn't* lure you to the bonfire

He laughed

My lovely Lynn I wouldn't have gone there for any other reason You know that

I tried to sun myself in the warmth of his tone and glance but I realized that I should never be able to recall that fateful night without a shudder It had scared me inwardly just as it had scared his fingers I should never forget what the consequences might have been Nor I feared would Patrick

Two miles outside Tretavy our market town Patrick had to brake suddenly and violently We had rounded a bend, very fast, to find a large shabby saloon car stationary in the middle of the road The bonnet of it was up and two middle-aged females appeared to be flapping around it

Patrick squeezed past with two wheels on the grassy bank

'Aren't you going to stop?' I said in surprise, as he brought the car back on to the road and accelerated 'They've obviously had a break down'

'So what?

It's Sunday evening The garage in Tretavy will be closed, even if they decide to walk that far Oughtn't we to stop and see if we can help them?

'My dear girl I'm not a mechanic Women are such

fools with cars. They oughtn't to be allowed on the roads,' he said loftily. 'If they will drive, they must put up with the consequences.'

'That's unfair! Ursula's an excellent driver and I'm not too bad. Anyway, that isn't the point. Those two poor old things are stranded.'

'We've no time to waste. If we stopped for every car which had a break-down, we shouldn't reach St. Chad's till midnight. On a summer Sunday, there are masses of cars on the roads, and one frequently sees break-downs.'

'And—and you never stop for them?'

'Of course not. My time is far too precious to squander it on complete strangers and their running repairs.'

My heart was hammering against my ribs. My throat seemed suddenly dry. My knees were trembling. I felt hot and cold simultaneously.

We were flying along the road to Tretavy. In another minute or two we should be into the town—and out of it again. Then it would be too late. It was now, or never. Could I speak? Could I nerve myself for the inevitable wrench?

My voice sounded odd and strained when I said: 'Stop at the Market Square, please. By the bus stop.'

'Stop? Why?'

'Because I'm getting out there and—and going back by bus.'

'Going back? Are you crazy? If you've forgotten something, it can be posted on to you.'

'No. I must go back. I'm sorry, Patrick. I ought to have seen it before and --and not wasted your time,' I said unsteadily. 'I suppose there is some excuse for me. Ever since I can remember, I've looked up to you as a very wonderful person. You've been my hero, my ideal, my dearest love. I still think you're wonderful . . .'

'What on earth is all this? Peeved because I didn't stop for those old biddies? Oh, don't be childish! Someone else will rescue them.'

'Yes. Someone else.' I swallowed hard. 'Patrick,

please listen. I know you'll have a wonderful future. You'll save countless lives, perform seeming miracles, be fêted and admired and knighted, and make your name a household word. What's more, you'll deserve it all because your whole heart and mind are pledged to your work.'

'Then, what's upsetting you?'

'It isn't my kind of life, and I can't live it with you. There's no place in it, no time in it for me, or for the things I think important.'

'How serious you sound!'

We were on the outskirts of Tretavy now, and insensibly he was slowing down, a pucker between his brows and a tautness to his lips.

'I am serious. It's— it's really what St. Paul says, in Corinthians, that I'm trying to explain. "Though I give my body to be burned —" and you would I stick in the interests of medical science, quite unhesitatingly. "Though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains —" You've that, too. You will move mountains and accomplish miracles in your own line.'

'Then——'

'It goes on, but have not charity.' Caritas, which is warmer and tenderer and kinder than charity, as we understand the word. That's what matters to me. That's what I must have. So—so please stop and let me go back.

'To Val?'

'Yes. He'll never be famous. He'll never do anything spectacular. Perhaps he isn't nearly as fine a character as you are. I don't know. Perhaps it doesn't matter what job a man does, provided he tackles it 'to the glory of God';' I said in a rush. 'All I know is that, with Val, there'll always be time. There'll be time for me, for our children, and for anyone who needs his help anywhere, in anything. He believes in "caritas", just as I do. We can travel the same road together, hand in hand.'

'You may find it a singularly uninspiring and monotonous road, but if it's what you want——'

He drove into the Market Square. He pulled up just beyond the bus stop. He turned and looked at me but he kept the engine running.

'Oh, Patrick, it's been such a long time, and I didn't guess it would end like this! Do you mind? There'll be so many girls who will love you and be ready to worship you.

I suppose there's always something rather special about one's first love. You're very lovely and very sweet, Lynn, but I disavow you've made the right decision. If you were always trailing along behind me with wistful glances over your shoulder it would be exasperating for both of us,' he said quizzically. 'As long as you're sure of your own mind--'

I'm sure. Oh there, the bus. Good-bye, Patrick, for now.

I crumbled out of the car in feverish haste because there was only one bus on a Sunday evening which went anywhere near Waterfall. Even so I should have to walk the last two miles home.

You're due on duty tomorrow. Patrick called after me. I know. I'll be there.

The bus was beginning to move as I swung myself on board but before it had lumbered out of the Square Patrick's sleek black car was out of sight.

I sunk into a rear seat and blinked hard, blinked away a few treacherous tears for the glamour and glory which I should never share now. It hurt—it hurt to part from Patrick—but there was no sense of guilt in the wrench there was, instead, a profound relief that it was over.

I paid my fare to our nearest bus stop but I didn't have to jog far in the slow and rumbling bus. Ten minutes after I had boarded it, the driver was laboriously manoeuvring it in very close to the bank. I looked out of the window. There was the shabby big saloon but no longer in the middle of the road. It had been pushed in close to the side. Beyond it a familiar green car was

neatly parked. Beside it his fiery head bent over the open bonnet, was Val.

My heart seemed to leap into my throat so that I was speechless. I sprang up and, dodging the conductor's outstretched hand, fairly hurled myself down the top.

I landed staggering against the bank. The bus lumbered on with the conductor eyeing me reproachfully out of the back window. I straightened my best hat self-consciously. I must look a fool standing there. The two middle-aged ladies who were hovering around the car were staring at me curiously.

I tilted my chin and walked up the stairs.

The small policeman, Val, came in a muffled voice without raising his head. "I've located the trouble. Your ignition wire has slipped."

I picked up the smallest spanner from the open tool kit on the running board. As I handed it to him, our fingers touched and I felt his stare. He didn't look up though, till he'd finished the job.

Even then he didn't speak. He just looked at me and smiled. I stood there silently while he repacked the tool kit, tutted the car, and waved the two grateful ladies on their way.

Then he turned to me. His fiery hair ruffled, his fingers streaked with oil, his tie under one ear.

"For rotten something," he asked with a jerk of his brows.

Still I couldn't speak. The only words which came to me were from a poem I had read years ago.

I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.

Only I didn't have to run. There was not there never had been any distance between Val and me. I just put out my hands to him and then I was where I belonged, held against his heart.